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GREEN BAY

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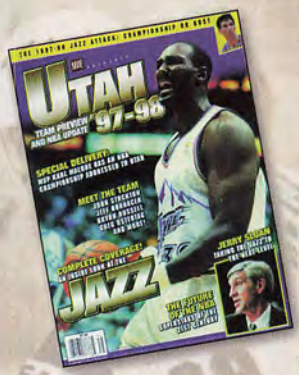
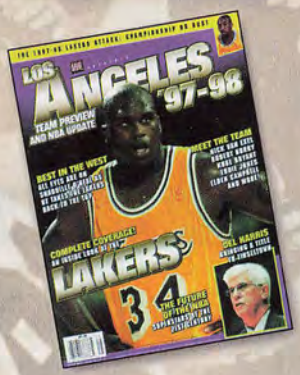
A rhinoceros enters the forest. He feeds on a fruit few animals can eat. The rhinoceros wanders out into the grasslands and spreads the fruit seeds. The seeds begin to grow. A new forest forms. Life flourishes in the new forest.

It's a whole new ballgame





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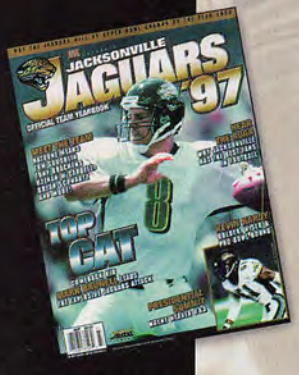

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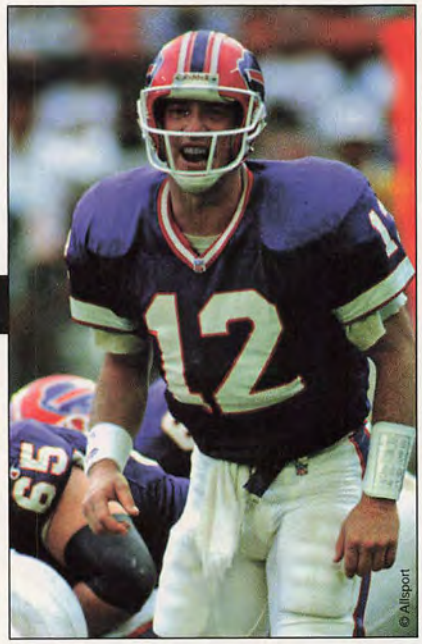

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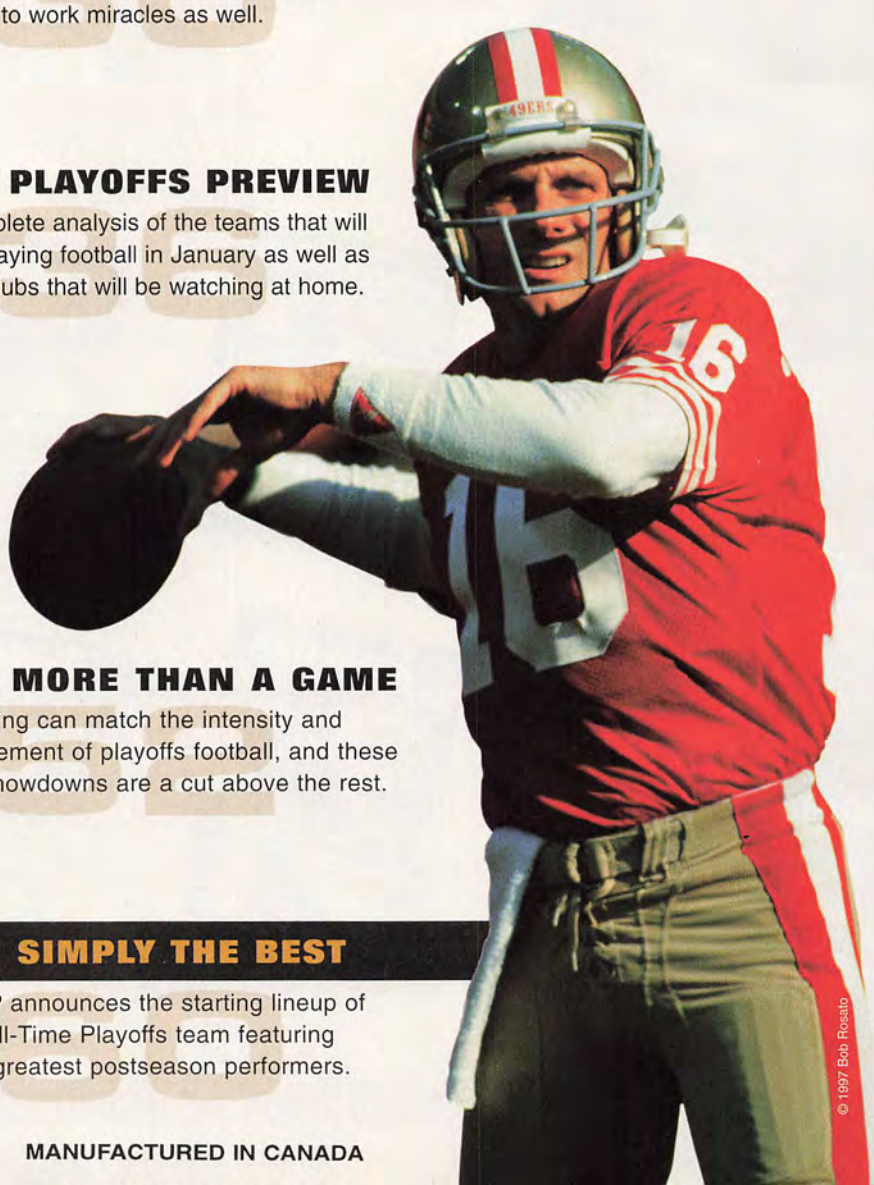

MANUFACTURED IN CANADA

E N T S

8 THE RETURN TRIP

Everyone's gunning for the Green and Gold, but the Packers have kept their return trip to the Super Bowl on course.

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MVP PRO FOOTBALL '97
GREEN BAY PLAYOFFS PREVIEW

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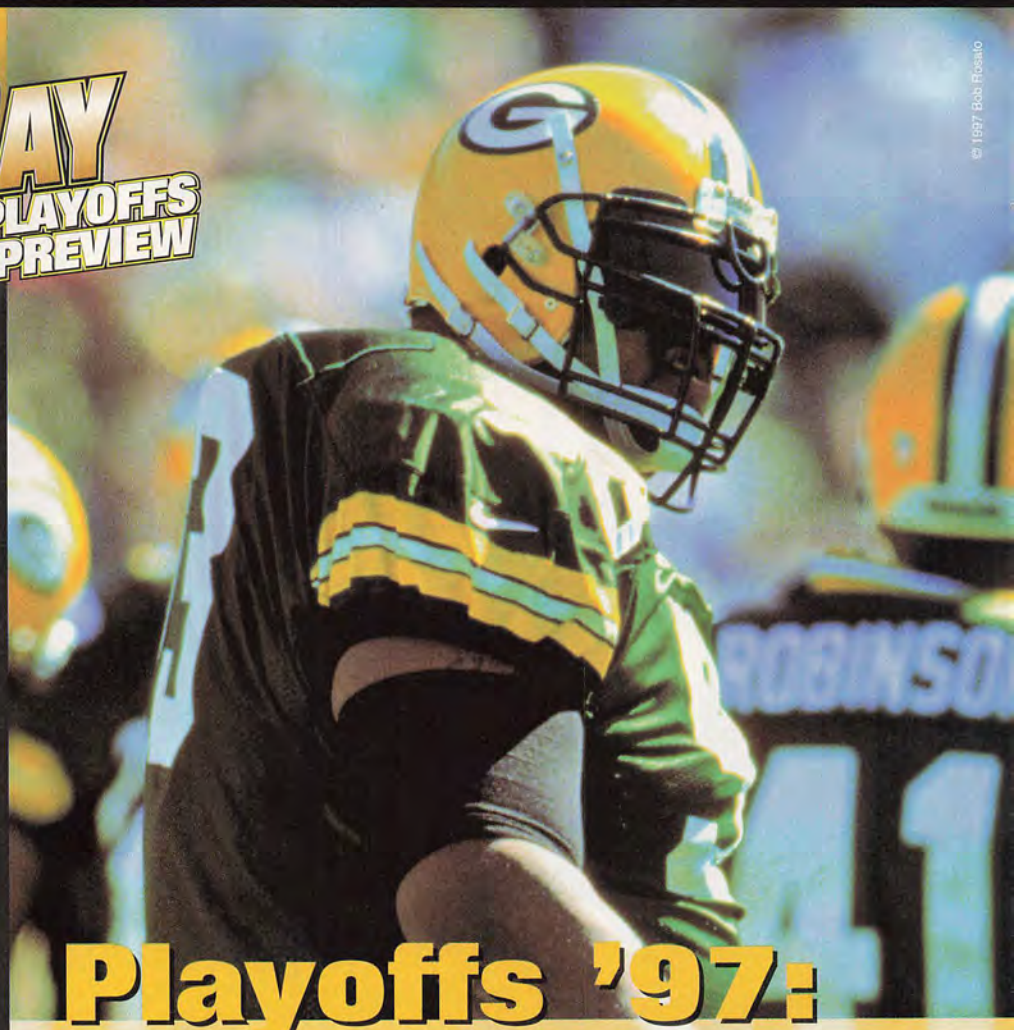


Playoffs '97: It's anybody's ballgame

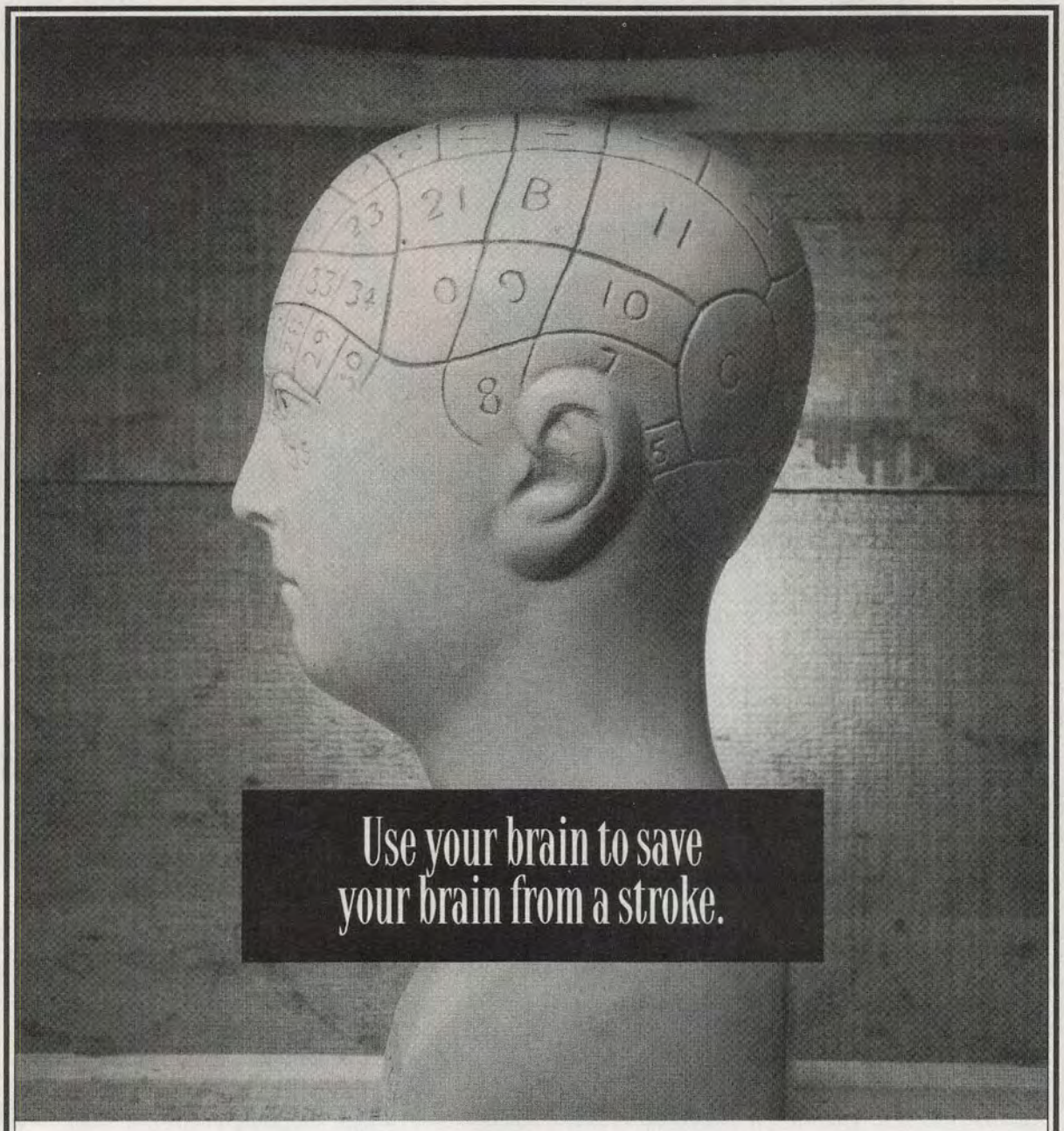
Break out the face paint, plug some new batteries into the remote control and stock the cooler next to your favorite easy chair. The NFL playoffs are ready to kick off, and in a year with no clear-cut favorites, football fanatics won't want to miss a snap.

As anyone cursed with an office pool already knows, parity has struck the league harder than a Bill Romanowski blindside hit. With all the missed kicks, colossal comebacks and overtime nail-biters, the '97 season has been one of the most unpredictable in recent memory. And while everyone with a printing press and an opinion picks the Broncos and Packers to lock horns in Super Bowl XXXII, the days of clear-cut winners and losers seem to be gone forever.

The season's biggest shockers, however, have come from the emergence of unexpected contenders. The young Bucs have come of age, the opportunistic Giants have the NFC East spinning, and the Jets' liftoff has made Bill Parcells look like even more of a genius.

As the Jaguars proved to us in the playoffs last season, it's anybody's ballgame.

Mike Stokes
Editor, MVP Sports



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Titletown, U.S.A.

Prior to the season, at least one Packer was openly contemplating the possibility of following up the team's first Super Bowl title in 29 years by going 19-0 and hoisting the Vince Lombardi Trophy again at Jack Murphy Stadium on Jan. 25, 1998.

Mike Holmgren could understand if these discussions were taking place among the faithful masses in cheese country, but the coach cringed when he got word that such rhetoric was resonating from the Packers' locker room. His edict: let our play on the field do the talking.

Early on, however, reality set in—in the form of a struggling offense, a defense that looked, well, human...and a rash of injuries that just compounded those problems. *E.R.* could have aired a live show at the scene of any given Packers game through the first five weeks of '97, and even George Clooney would have had his hands full.

A short list of those who missed action due to injury during that span: Kicker Brett Conway, tight end Mark Chmura, center Frank Winters, tackle Earl Dotson, guard Aaron Taylor, defensive tackle Gilbert Brown, linebacker Seth Joyner, cornerback Doug Evans and wideouts Derrick Mayes and Don Beebe. Meanwhile, running back Edgar Bennett and cornerback Craig Newsome both went down with season-ending injuries, and the Packers had to wait until late in the season to get back linebacker George Koonce—out since last January with a torn ACL.

As the injured list grew, so did the losses and all talk about about 19-0 had been silenced by Week 2.

"There are a lot of good football teams in the league, and every week it's going to be a battle," said Holmgren after the 10-9 defeat, "so our wakeup call this season came pretty early."

But Holmgren predicted even before the year began there would be days like these. "There might be some bumps along the road, and there probably will be some bumps along the road," he said, "but we'll be able to handle that."

For the most part, they have. And when it's all said and done, the bumps will be worth it, so long as they don't derail another motorcade through downtown Green Bay in late January. ✖

By Mike Sandrolini

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Throw bac

Green Bay's Brett Favre may be the top passer of the '90s, but he's got the heart of an old school quarterback

By Pete Dougherty

In the summer of '96, Brett Favre faced an auditorium full of Wisconsin and national media just after he had spent six weeks in drug rehabilitation. There, he made a bold proclamation: The Green Bay Packers were going to win the Super Bowl, and anyone who didn't think so should bet against him, because he'd make sure to prove them wrong.

True to his prognostication, Favre went out and led the Packers to a 13-3 record and their first Super Bowl title in 29 years. Little did he know that making such a promise stand up was the easy part, compared with trying to repeat.

After a glorious off-season, the Packers were hit by a barrage of injuries that contributed to a slow start during the first half of 1997. Though they were 5-2 nearing the halfway mark, their performance cast doubt that they would capture back-to-back Super Bowl titles.

"It's a little more difficult to come off as the defending champions than as the chaser," Favre says. "Every week it's so important. You lose and everybody says, 'They're not what they were last year.' It puts a lot of pressure on you. But I'd rather be in this position than in the other position."

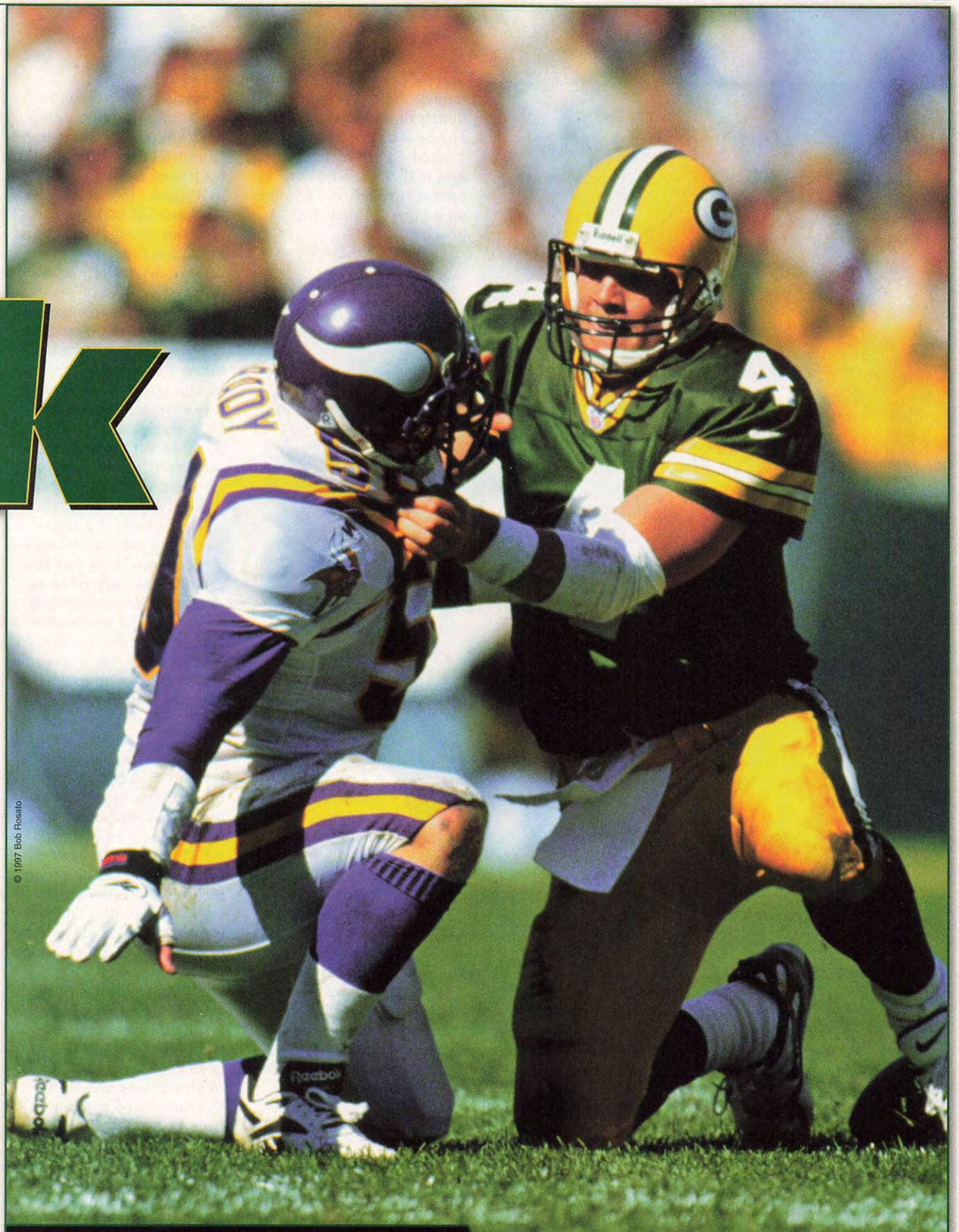
Favre knows a thing or two about how challenging it can be to repeat, because in 1995 and '96 he joined legend Joe Montana as the only player ever to win back-to-back league MVP awards. Favre won his first MVP in '95 by throwing 38 touchdown passes—an NFC record and third-most in NFL history—and only 13 interceptions. Remarkably, he followed that up by throwing 39 TD passes and 13 interceptions, this time taking the Pack to the world title.

Favre's performance was as impressive of a back-to-back showing as any quarterback in league history. Perhaps more remarkable, he was only 27 when the Packers defeated New England in Super Bowl XXXI. Favre realizes the public expects him to continue posting eye-popping numbers, but he's not worried if he doesn't live up to the expectations of others.

"If I don't throw 39 touchdown passes this year, people are going to wonder if I'm losing a step," Favre says. "I personally know how hard it is to play that way every year. But that seems to be everyone's perception, that you don't play as well if the stats aren't as good. We could still win the Super Bowl and I don't have to play as well, and people will think I had an off year. I don't concern myself with it and beat myself up with it. I just know that's the way it is."

At midseason, Favre wasn't threatening the record-setting pace he had established his previous two campaigns, though he still was

K



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There's nothing Brett Favre, the toughest QB in the league, won't do to help the Packers get back to the Super Bowl.

Favre's numbers may be down from his back-to-back MVP campaigns, but he is still the NFL's premier quarterback.

among the top-producing quarterbacks in the NFL. His 86.2 passer rating ranked eighth in the league, and with 15 touchdown passes through Week 8, he's on a pace to finish with 34—his third-best single-season total, but one that would be down slightly from the past two seasons.

But while Favre continued an ironman streak of 84 straight starts and counting—the longest among quarterbacks in the NFL—the team around him eroded due to early-season injuries. On the offensive line alone, the Packers lost center Frank Winters (sprained foot) and right tackle Earl Dotson (back) for two games each, and guard Aaron Taylor (knee) for one game. They also lost running back Edgar Bennett in an exhibition game to a season-ending Achilles tendon injury.

Despite being short-handed much of the time, Favre continued to make MVP-like plays—like shrugging off potential sacks or running outside the pocket and making a number of remarkable bullet passes into the tightest of seams. Yet on a couple of occasions, he also tried to do too much and made a few big mistakes. For instance, in the second quarter of Green Bay's Week 5 contest at Detroit, Favre tripped while going back to pass and tried to throw from his knees to convert a third down and keep a drive alive. But the pass went right to Lions linebacker Reggie Brooks, who tipped the ball in the air, intercepted it and returned it 45 yards for a touchdown that gave the Lions a 7-6 lead and new life in a game they would go on to win. It was the kind of risky, spontaneous play Favre had thrived on the past two seasons, but one that failed to net the kind of results both he and fans have come to expect. Nevertheless, Favre believes he's as good this year, if not better—even if his statistics and the team's record don't reflect it.

"I still feel like I'm playing as well, making as good of decisions as I have in the past," Favre says. "I'm studying as hard. Physically I'm feeling as good."

The Packers' biggest struggles this season have been on defense, but their offense hasn't been quite the fine-tuned machine it's been previously. In coach Mike Holmgren's West Coast offense, Favre and the Packers had built a reputation for making big plays, converting third

downs and scoring touchdowns once they got inside an opponent's 20.

But after finishing last season with the second-best conversion rate on third downs in the league (44.3 percent), they slipped to 17th (32.9 percent) through seven games this year. Similarly, after scoring touchdowns 58.1 percent of the time when they got inside their opponent's 20 last season (sixth in the league), they've since dropped to 46.7 percent (18th overall).

So why the free fall in the rankings? Well basically the Packers found that teams were taking more risks against them and blitzing more often than they had in the past, and the offense was unable to hit on enough big plays to get opposing defensive coordinators to change their strategies. For instance, in a 10-9 loss at Philadelphia during Week 2, the Eagles blitzed Favre on more than 30 plays.

Seeing this trend—plus trying to compensate for the injuries that had decimated the offensive line early on—Holmgren and offensive coordinator Sherman Lewis began designing plays to try to limit the number of hits Favre would take from blitzing defenders.

"Maybe we have been a little conservative," Lewis willingly concedes, "but you look around at teams that lose their quarterback; when that happens the season's over. Keeping Brett healthy is priority No. 1, and if we have to be conservative to do that, then we'll be conservative."

While Favre hasn't had to endure the merciless scrutiny he did following his summer in rehabilitation for an addiction to painkillers, he's found out that playing with a multi-million dollar contract brings its own set of pressures. During training camp, he signed a new seven-year contract that pays him an average of $6.75 million per season. Included was a $12 million signing bonus—the second-highest in league history.

Early in his career with the Packers, Favre spoke publicly about wanting to go down in history as one of the greatest quarterbacks ever to play, and if his continued scrambling-with-abandon play this year is any indication, his new contract has not diminished his appetite for that kind of recognition. Favre maintains that the way to achieve such status is by winning Super Bowls rather than accumulating incredible stats. So while he's already accomplished some remarkable statistical feats in only five-plus seasons—this season, for example, he passed Bart Starr to become the Packers' all-time leader in touchdowns passes—his eyes remain on that most difficult-to-reach prize: another Super Bowl crown.

Even though the Packers experienced plenty of struggles during the first half of '97, they still found themselves owning one of the best overall records in the NFC. And Favre, who's always been supremely confident in his abilities, still insists the Packers are the NFL's best team.

"We are the world champions until someone knocks us off in late January," Favre says. "We will be the world champions until then—they know that and we know that. But this is a different season." ✖

The Playmakers

Players Leading the Packers on the Field and Into the Playoffs

Big Time

Gilbert Brown

At some point last season, Brown quite literally eclipsed Reggie White as the man most feared on the Packers' defensive line. Several teams ran on the Packers at will this season while Brown was laid up with an injury. For Green Bay to repeat, Brown must be healthy.

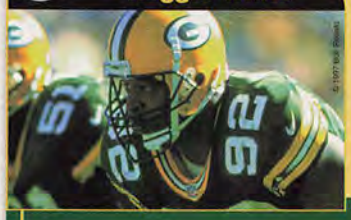
On the Run...

Since Edgar Bennett went down with a season-ending injury in the preseason, Levens has been solid as the starting tailback. Despite operating behind a shaky line, he has given the Pack production on the ground and been a sure-handed receiver out of the backfield.

Dorsey Levens

Ya Gotta Believe

Reggie White

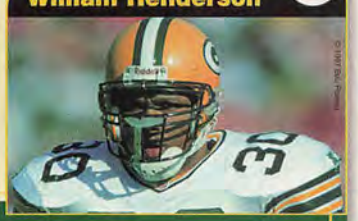


Quarterbacks may as well get on their knees when the NFL's Minister of Defense shows up on Sundays—they'll end up on their backs soon enough. Even at 36 (which he turns in December), the league's all-time sack leader is nearly unstoppable. He's at his best when it counts most.

Leading the Way

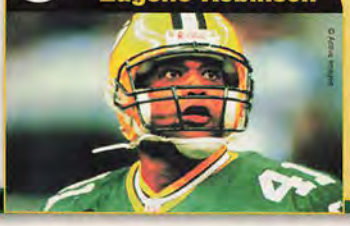
A piledriver of a lead blocker and a fine receiver, Henderson is a poor man's Moose Johnston. He doesn't stand out in a stat box, but you would know it if he weren't in the Green Bay lineup. If they know what's good for them, the Packers will get him more directly involved.

William Henderson



Here's to You, Mr. Robinson

Eugene Robinson



Robinson is a leader for the Packers in every sense of the word. Though he's a behind-the-scenes kind of guy—he's quietly intercepted more passes than any other player in the '90s—he has the type of presence that teams aiming for championships need for players to follow.

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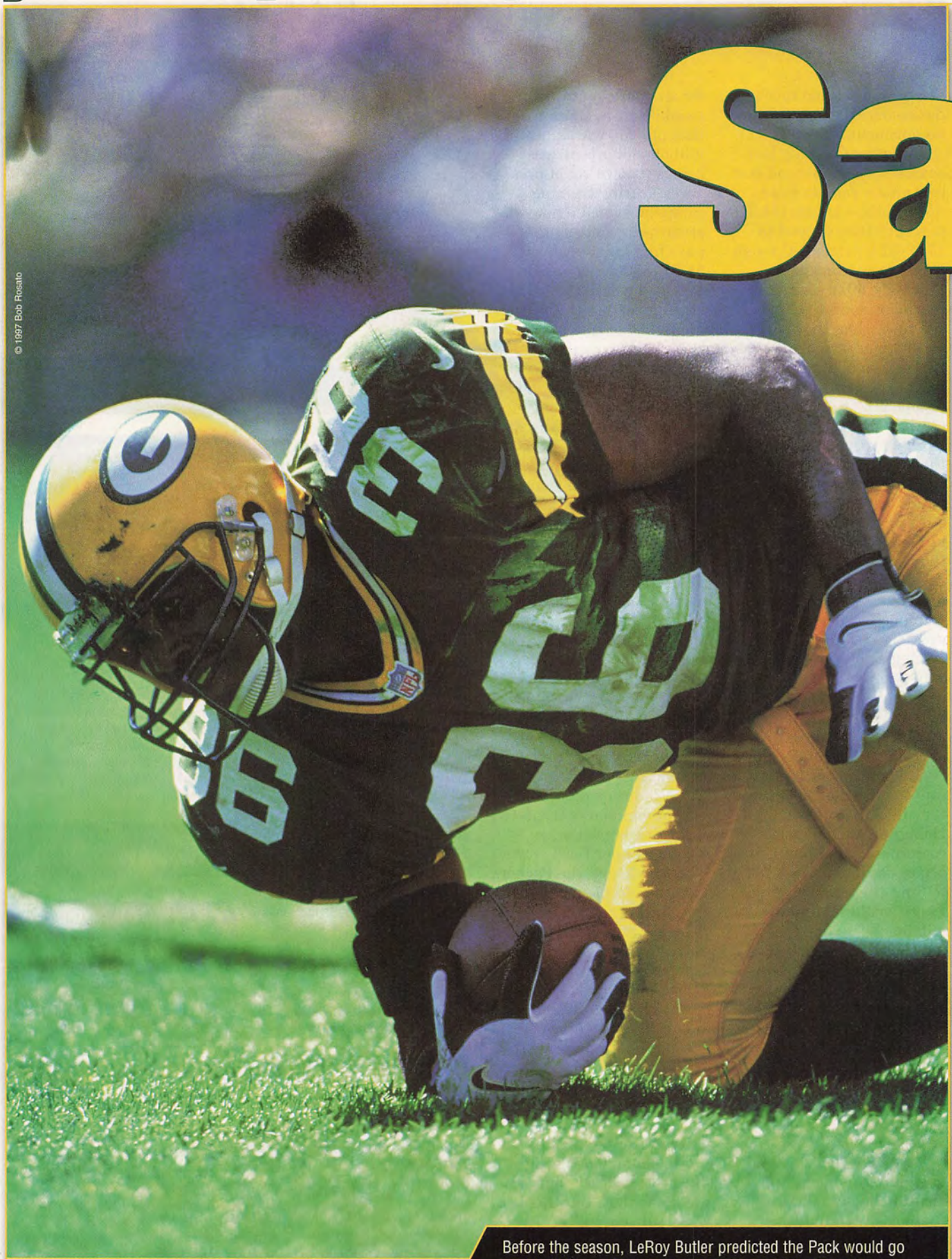

Before the season, LeRoy Butler predicted the Pack would go undefeated, much to the chagrin of coach Mike Holmgren.

fety First

With injuries riddling the Packers' defense, LeRoy Butler has gone from kamikaze to conservative this season

By Pete Dougherty

Back in mid-July, Green Bay Packers safety LeRoy Butler answered a straight-forward question from a reporter with a typically straight-forward answer. Can the 1997 Packers go undefeated? Yes, he replied, unaware of the repercussions his prediction would generate.

Butler's sound bite made instant headlines during the slow news days of early training camp...and made Mike Holmgren bristle.

"I told him I didn't want to hear that any more," says Holmgren, who isn't known for his tolerance of such potential distractions. "We have a lot of very talkative guys on our team. I just told them like I did last year, 'Let's let our actions speak for the football team.' We don't need to be real verbal with all that stuff."

As it turned out, Holmgren didn't need to put a gag order on Butler or any other Packer who entertained visions of 19-0. The Philadelphia Eagles took care of all the talk for him in Week 2, surprising the Packers 10-9. And by the time the Packers limped into their bye week after seven games, they had suffered another defeat—this one to division rival Detroit—and in the process lost the air of invincibility they gained during their Super Bowl run.

But Butler says he has no regrets for stating publicly what he believes a number of teammates thought privately: that the Packers could indeed go 19-0, even though the notion seemed preposterous so early in the season.

"If I had to do it all over again, I would," Butler says unflinchingly. "I thought we were mature enough to make the corrections and keep this team's status. But we lost it so quick."

Indeed, the Packers are realizing that defending a Super Bowl title is much more difficult than winning one. Perhaps the most surprising development of the '97 season is that despite their 5-2 record near the halfway point, their defense had slipped dramatically from its record-setting performance of a year ago, when they were on their way to becoming the first team since the 1972 Miami Dolphins to lead the league in most points scored and fewest points allowed. Those Dolphins, you'll remember, are the only NFL team ever to march through an entire regular season and postseason unbeaten and untied.

Along the way, the 1996 Packers finished with the NFL's best overall defense and were No. 1 against the pass. In addition, they surrendered only 19 touchdowns—the fewest since the league went to a 16-game

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Butler believes the Packers must become more focused and not make as many mistakes in fundamentals if they hope to have a chance to repeat as Super Bowl champs.

schedule in 1978—and forced 39 turnovers, tying them for third overall in that department.

But by Week 8 of this season, the Packers defense experienced difficulty stopping even the hapless Bears. They ranked 24th in the league in total yards allowed, an astounding 27th in rushing yards allowed and 18th in points allowed. The Packers also had forced just 11 turnovers, or half as many as the league-leading San Francisco's 22.

There's no question injuries played a prominent role in causing the Pack's defense to go into a tailspin. Cornerback Craig Newsome suffered a season-ending knee injury on the Packers' very first play from scrimmage in '97, while a bad knee also caused mammoth nose tackle Gilbert Brown to miss two full games and ended up slowing him down significantly in four others.

Losing Newsome and Brown also had a domino effect on the club. Brown is arguably the NFL's premier run-stopper, and Newsome's absence forced the Pack to change Butler's role at safety in order to compensate for a drop off in pass coverage.

Butler believes, however, that injuries alone don't explain the Packers' defensive slide. The team as a whole lost a mental edge since winning the Super Bowl last January.

"You put so much energy into winning the championship that you exhale a little bit and say, 'OK, that's it,' " he says. "It's an uphill battle after that. Everybody wants to win the first one. But it took a lot out of us. I expected us to hit the ground running."

A Pro Bowler and first-team All-Pro selection last season who posted five interceptions and 6.5 sacks, the versatile Butler is enjoying probably the best year of anyone on the Packers' defense, though his contributions aren't showing up on the stat sheet like they did last year. Newsome's injury has had a profound effect on Butler's role, rendering him more of a one-dimensional player. Last year, defensive coordinator Fritz Shurmur had great confidence in the abilities of Newsome and right cornerback Doug Evans to cover receivers one-on-one. And as the season went on, Shurmur often played Butler near the line of scrimmage, which put him in a position to offer run support, threaten a blitz or play a receiver.

"There's not a safety in football who can do all the things [Butler] can do from the standpoint of blitzing and coverage and all that," Shurmur says. "He has cor-

nerback skills and came in [to the league] with corner skills in terms of speed and those kinds of things. The ability to have him in that capacity is almost immeasurable because it does allow us to do some things that some teams can't because they're not as well-equipped at that position as we are."

But this year, with second-year pro Tyrone Williams replacing Newsome, Butler has blitzed less, concentrating more on pass coverage so he or another defensive back can lend support to Williams. Consequently, the Packers haven't mounted as ferocious a pass rush or forced as many turnovers.

Although injuries haven't cut into Butler's playing time, he's endured his share of pain. A torn right biceps suffered during the Packers' Week 5 loss at Detroit slowed Butler for nearly a month, and he finally got back to full speed just before a Monday night rematch with New England, in which the Packers rolled over the Pats again, 28-10.

Yet despite all these trials and tribulations, the Packers think they can regain their killer instinct of a year ago, when they won their last five regular-season games and all three postseason contests by an average score of 33-12. Last year, Butler wasn't entirely convinced the Packers would go on to win the Super Bowl until they defeated the Denver Broncos. But they did—by the convincing margin of 41-6—and Butler believed.

"I thought, 'We're unstoppable now,' " he says. "They were the best team in the AFC, and we really laid it on them. We were fresh in November and December."

This year, the Packers have a number of potential big games down the stretch, including a home game against Dallas on Nov. 23, and a three-game road stretch in December vs. tough division foes Minnesota and Tampa Bay and a resurgent Carolina.

Butler hopes the Packers will be on the mend as much as possible for this year's stretch run—especially Brown and inside linebacker George Koonce, who missed the first half of '97 recovering from reconstructive knee surgery performed last January. A little attitude adjustment wouldn't hurt, either.

"I'm hoping it does turn around," Butler says. "I'm hoping over the [bye week] some guys took time to reflect on what they can do. But right now I really don't know. I hope we do [get it turned around].

"I studied San Francisco, Dallas, Washington and New York, and how they performed the next year [after winning the Super Bowl]," he added. "Only Dallas and San Francisco were focused enough to win again the next year. You take Washington and the New York Giants, the following year they made so many fundamental mistakes there was no way they could repeat. When we won the Super Bowl, a lot of things happened, more bad than good. You've set a standard, and people expect that, and there's more pressure. Not everybody responds to that. I think we could [repeat], but we're still making a lot of mistakes we're taught not to make in April."

Interesting food for thought in cheese land. ✖

Between the Lines

Uncovering Green Bay's Unsung Heroes and Underachievers of 1997

The Quicker-Picker Upper

Antonio Freeman

One of the league's emerging stars, Freeman has picked up the slack in the passing game with Robert Brooks apparently not fully recovered from last year's knee injury. But Freeman has been inconsistent at times. When he is on, so too are the Packers. When he's not…

Well Done

Williams has been thrown into the fire this season and sports the burn marks to show for it. It may have been too much to ask of the second-year cornerback to replace the injured Craig Newsome on a moment's notice. Still, Williams needs to step up or the Packers' goose is cooked.

Tyrone Williams

Where's the Beef?

Aaron Taylor

Taylor is the man who could make or break the Packers' offense in the playoffs. The oft-injured, fourth-year guard has been a force when healthy. But if he's not in service for the postseason, an already-thin Green Bay offensive line may be in over its head. Brace yourself Brett.

Hole in the Middle

Why has the Green Bay defense fallen so far, so fast? One reason has been Koonce's slow recovery from a severe knee injury. A popular player in the locker room and the Packers' leading tackler the past two years, Koonce could be a boost for the team in the playoffs.

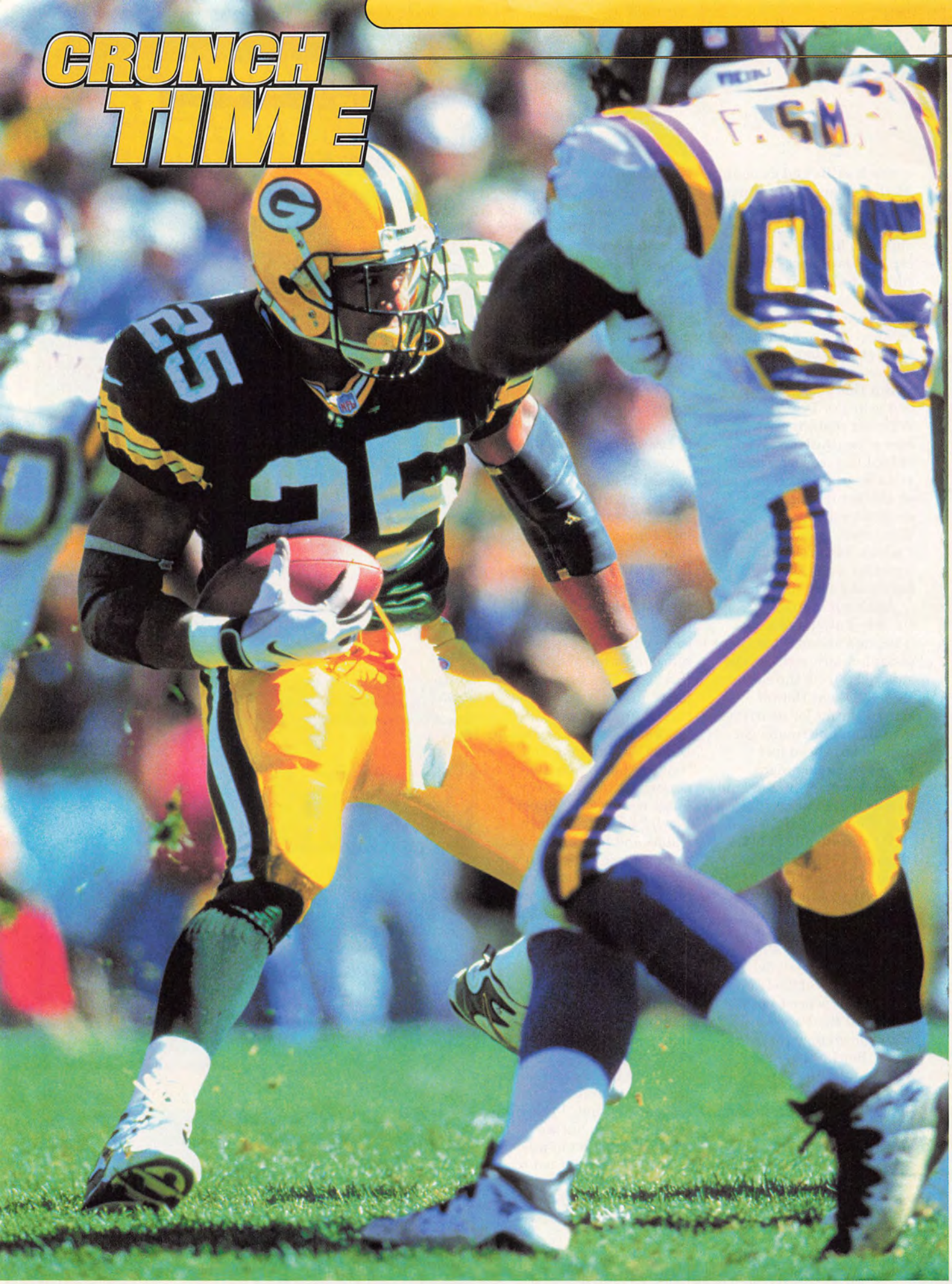
George Koonce

No End in Sight

Mark Chmura

Once Favre's favorite target, Chmura seems to have become the forgotten man in the Green Bay offense. Though he has been in and out of the lineup with injuries, he hasn't been utilized enough when available. The Packers need to look his way more often to open things up.

CRUNCH TIME



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THE POWER BEHIND THE PACK ATTACK
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REGGIE WHITE
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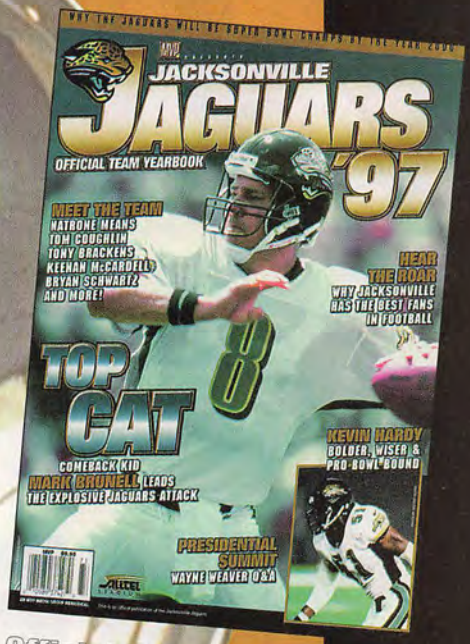

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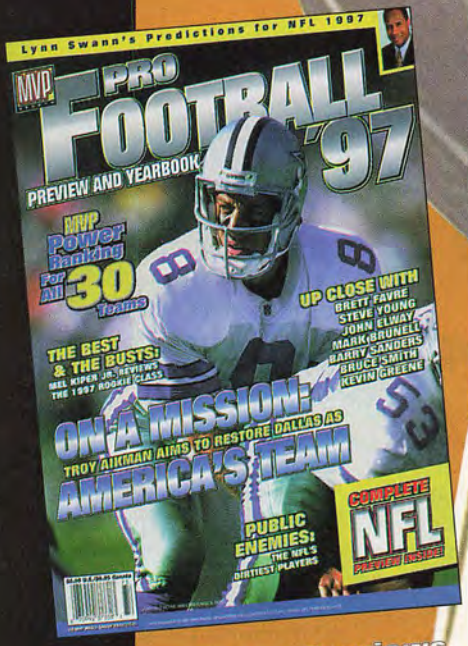
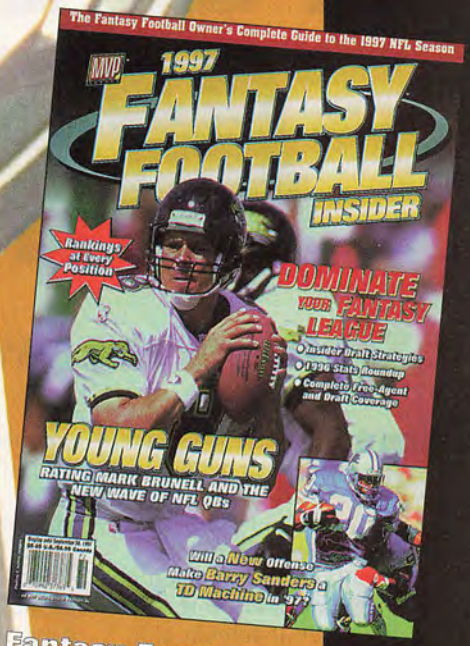


Season Previews


The Fantasy Football Owner's Complete Guide to the 1997 NFL Season
MVP 1997 FANTASY FOOTBALL INSIDER
Rankings at Every Position
DOMINATE YOUR FANTASY LEAGUE
Insider Draft Strategies
1996 Stats Roundup
Complete Free-Agent and Draft Coverage
YOUNG GUNS
RATING MARK BRUNELL AND THE NEW WAVE OF NFL QBs
Will a New Offense Make Barry Sanders a TD Machine in '97?

Fantasy Football

Look for MVP titles on newsstands everywhere

by Jason Langendorf

Alive and Kicking

Kickers score points but get no respect

Trailing the Cardinals 10-7 with possession at the Arizona 21 and :26 left in regulation, the Eagles risk falling to 2-4 and out of playoff contention with a loss. The Philadelphia plan of attack? Naturally, quarterback Rodney Peete guns for the end zone four times but comes up short and the vanquished Eagles go home with heavy hearts.

Except that's not how it happened. In the crazy, quirky, complex world of the kicker, the Eagles weren't forced to go for the touchdown. As a matter of fact, all it would take for new life in overtime was a minor triviality, a simple chip shot, a virtual nothing in the course of the game: a field goal.

But in a season that has seen more muffed kicks, blocked kicks and general oddities on game-turning field goal tries than any other in recent memory, nothing can be taken for granted. Never has the importance of a steady kicker been more obvious.

The placekicker is the most overlooked man on any team's roster, and his bread and butter is the most under-appreciated commodity in football. Yet he often holds the balance of monumental contests—not to mention his future employment and either the scorn or affections of an entire team and city—in the

power and precision of his kicking foot.

It's an unstable and often nomadic existence. Unlike most other players, kickers are shuffled around the league like trading cards. They are considered second-class citizens on most teams—less football player than soccer flunkie. And considering most kickers are their team's leading scorer, their salaries are rarely proportionate to their overall impact on the game.

But it's that last point that really burns most kickers. They've long since grown accustomed to being cut and signed, waived and re-signed and being viewed as some sort of mascot by teammates. But underpaid? That just won't do.

"Every team has a different philosophy," says Steve Weinberg, agent for Pittsburgh kicker Chris Jacke. "Some teams don't care to pay their kicker, others will pay the going rate to get the best ones."

Take the aforementioned Eagles. After falling to division rival Dallas twice last season, the Eagles hit the Cowboys back through free agency, signing kicker Chris Boniol, Dallas' leading scorer in 1996, to a top-dollar contract. The Cowboys, who would rather attend a policeman's ball than pay their kicker what he's worth, let Boniol go and opted for rookie Richie Cunningham, who, for now, is happy to work for minimum wage.

"There's nothing different from what Cunningham is doing than what Boniol did," says Weinberg. "But the way the free agency system is set up, Boniol got the chance to sign a big contract. Dallas got lucky finding Cunningham."

So then, what exactly is the difference between kickers? It's hard to say. There is an elite, name-brand group whose members are as automatic as it gets. But most others, depending on the wind, the playing surface and what they ate for lunch, will kick a football through the eye of a needle on a good day but can't hit the broad side of an offensive lineman on a bad one.

Of course, this is the nature of the beast. Most of us—including your average NFL head coach—don't realize just how difficult it is to kick a sometimes uncooperative, oblong, leather object 40 yards through an 18-foot, 6-inch space with any degree of consistency.

The act, in itself, requires rare skill. But to carry that act out in a game situation, accompanied by the wilting, on-the-spot pressure, calls for solid-steel cajones.

"The biggest problem is there's only one kicker per team," says Weinberg, who also represents five punters, another red-headed stepchild of the league. "Most players, if they're not playing well, there's somebody else to come in. If you're a kicker, you don't get benched—you get released and lose your income."

As a result, the unprecedented movement of kickers, unseen at most other positions in the NFL, continues. No fewer than eight teams changed their kicker in the off-season and nearly that many brought in a new man the year before. More are sure to follow when this season ends.

While a rock-steady few will be rewarded (usually by another team) for their prolonged success, the remaining members of the kicking clan will have to pinch their pennies, make sure to turn the lights out behind them and always, but always, pack a toothbrush.

And what ever became of that otherwise inconsequential, but telling Eagles-Cardinals matchup earlier this season? Boniol drilled the game-tying 38-yard field goal, then won it with a 24-yarder in OT to play hero for a day. But make no mistake, it *is* only for a day. ✖

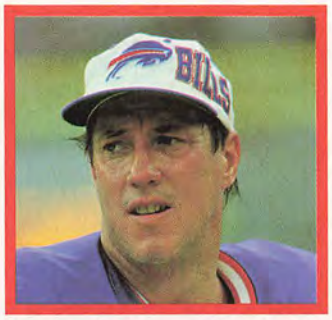
Deja Vu All Over Again?

When it Comes to Preseason Picks, Annuals Are a Mixed Bag

With the emergence of professional football as America's favorite spectator sport, the only thing more certain than a Steve Young concussion is the millions of preseason football magazines that elbow each other on newsstands every summer. Although these annuals succeed in providing football junkies with everything required to overcome the off-season, their accuracy come December usually goes unchecked. In an effort to hold these publications (including our own) accountable for their predictions, MVP Sports editors dusted off the preseason guides to see who had it right and who had it wrong through the tenth week of the season...

PREDICTION:	Street & Smith's	Athlon	Lindy's	SI	MVP
NFC Representative	None	Green Bay	Green Bay	Green Bay	Green Bay
AFC Representative	None	Denver	Denver	Jacksonville	Denver
Super Bowl Winner	No Opinion?	Green Bay	Green Bay	Green Bay	Green Bay
Best Prediction	Seattle second in AFC West	Dallas second in NFC East	Miami second in AFC East	Tampa second in NFC Central	Giants third in NFC East
Worst Prediction	Giants last in NFC East	Bengals to make playoffs	Carolina in NFC title game	Seattle last in AFC West	Colts to win AFC East
Easiest Prediction	Denver to win AFC West	Packers to win NFC Central	Chicago to miss playoffs	Saints last in NFC West	49ers to make playoffs
Coolest Feature	All-Time Dream Team units	Critical play for each team	Bang-for-bucks Tasker Awards	Focus on AFC Central QBs	All-Dysfunctional Team
What's Up With That?	'A' grade for Bengals' weak draft class	Profound seven-page tailgating story	Goofy Mark Brunell-Forrest Gump ad	Damn subscription inserts keep getting in way	Lynn Swann says Steelers headed for a fall

Passer Rati



by Jim Kelly

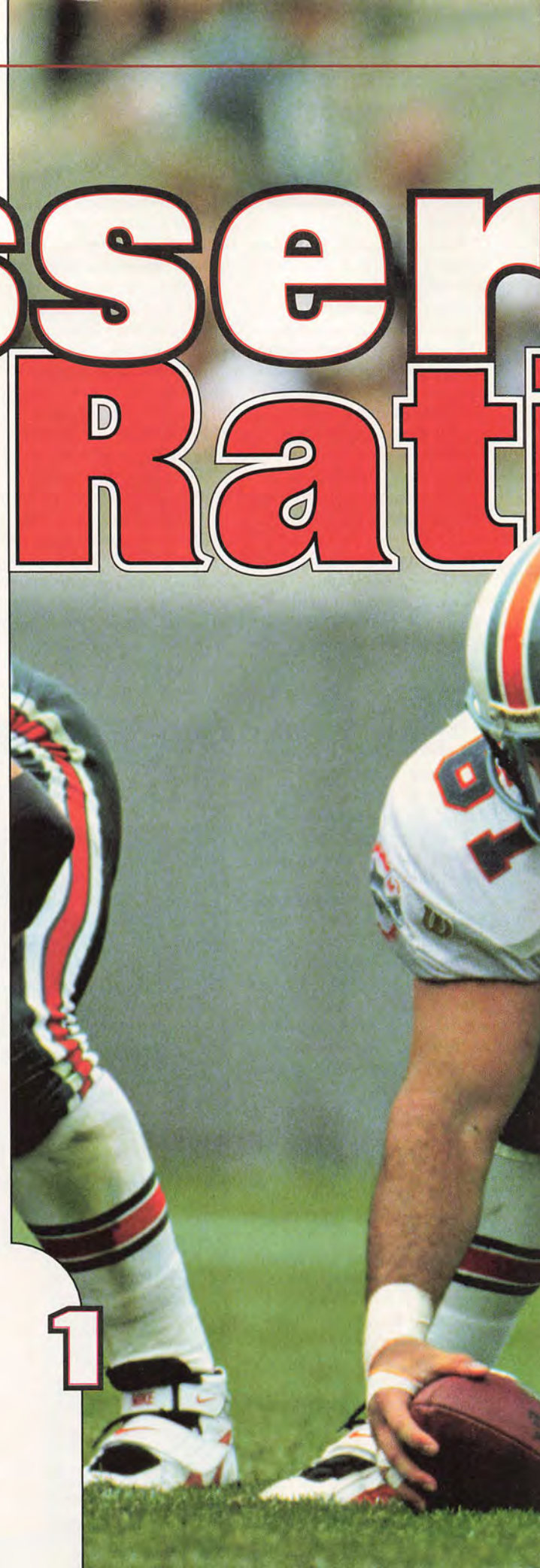
Growing up in western Pennsylvania, there were two quarterbacks with distinctly different styles who I admired. As a kid, I was a huge Pittsburgh Steelers fan. I admired Terry Bradshaw's strong throwing arm, his ability to rally the players on his team for a win, and, of course, his four Super Bowl victories inspired me. I was also a huge fan of Joe Namath because of who he was off the field. I liked the way he strutted his stuff, what he did for his team and how he carried himself as a gentleman—a class act from start to finish.

Though they had different styles, Bradshaw and Namath are two of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play the game. Tough both mentally and physically, each was the leader of his team. Although they played in different eras, the characteristics that made them great are still the most important aspects of being a quarterback today.

There's so much talk about the necessity of the quarterback to be the team leader, but that role is not something that can be thrown upon him. Whether you like it or not, taking snaps does not automatically make you a leader. The great quarterbacks aren't leaders because they were told to be; they're leaders because they were born that way. They were born to take control. The quarterback doesn't have to be a leader, but it's a big plus if he is.

Top quarterbacks also have the confidence to shake off mistakes. If he throws a couple of interceptions, he must be mentally tough enough to put it aside, forget about it and go on. There are too many good quarterbacks who let that bother them, and it's important to realize early on that if an interception is going to bother you, you're in the wrong business.

Quarterbacks also must possess nerves of steel. When the guy blitzing up the middle hits you in the mouth—and it's going to happen—you have to be tough enough to keep concentrating on what you're supposed to be doing, which is reading the secondary, and not be concerned about getting blitzed. If you can't handle that sort



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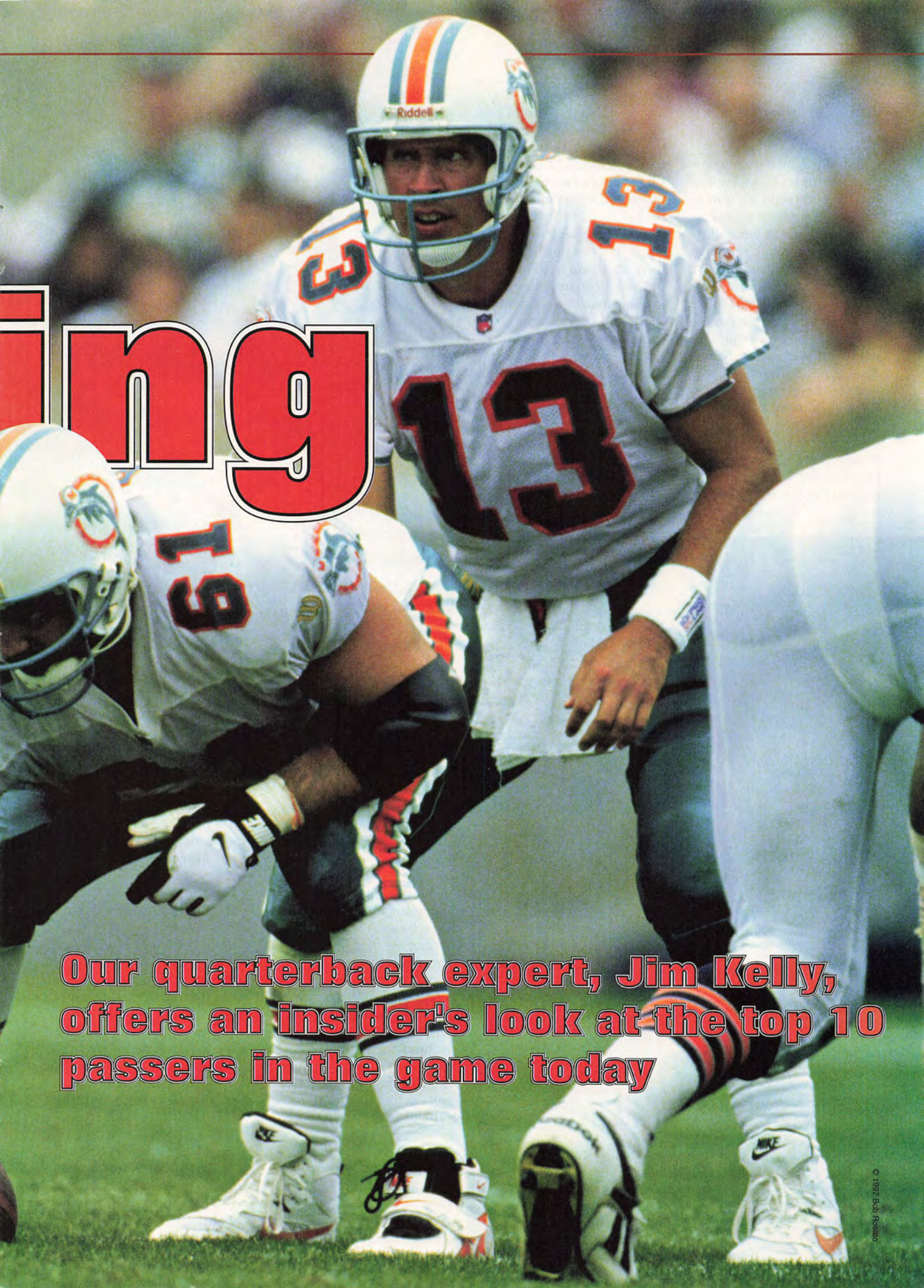
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Our quarterback expert, Jim Kelly, offers an insider's look at the top 10 passers in the game today
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of pressure, you're in for a long day, a long year and a difficult career.

Finally, how a quarterback—or any player, for that matter—steps up his game when he's hurting tells a lot about the type of football player he is. What you have to realize is that playing with pain comes with the territory, especially in the playoffs. Whether you're a 14-2 division-winner or a 9-7 wild-card team, everybody's dead even in the playoffs and for the losing team, there is no next week. I know there are plenty of times that I, and guys like Bruce Smith and Kent Hull, have played with pain before. I enjoy watching a tough quarterback who gets up when he's hurting, and the more he gets hit, the better he plays. There were times where I would have played better at middle linebacker because I was so pumped up going into the game. It's the guys that have that competitive fire in their eyes and have it in their hearts to get out there and play at a level people are not accustomed to that separates the men from the boys when January rolls around.

By picking a list of top quarterbacks for the year, I'm sure to ruffle some feathers. Quarterbacks are a close-knit group, and everybody's out there busting their butts, but as each player in the quarterback club knows, if you come into our huddle, be ready to take some flack, because you're going to get it. If you can't take it, you're with the wrong set of guys, and sometimes you need to have a coat of armor five inches thick to play the position. One good thing about it, though, is we enjoy being around each other and that's what keeps us together. That being said, here's my choices for the top 10 QBs of 1997:

1. Dan Marino
Miami Dolphins

Marino is flat out the best quarterback to ever play the game. As the head of the quarterback class of '83, his body may be starting to wear down as he gets older, but Marino could be 40 years old and I'd still say he's the best. To get back to the Super Bowl, the Dolphins are going to need a lot of help, but while Marino doesn't have the receivers he used to in the days of Mark Clayton and Mark Duper, he's still got the quickest release in football and gets the job done game after game. Marino's a competitor who loves the game, and he'd probably play until he was 50, if he could.

2. Brett Farve
Green Bay Packers

Favre's competitiveness reminds me of the way I went out as a little kid and played football on the street.

If Favre gets knocked down or gets a bloody nose, he gets pumped up and excited, and that's when he's at his best. He has the same type of attitude that I had when I played the game. Green Bay has been bitten by the injury bug this year, and I'm sure Favre's not having as much fun as he did last year when they were on top of the world and kicking every body's butt. But what he's also finding out this year is that other teams are gearing up for the Packers, knowing they have to play their best game against Green Bay, and they are.

3. John Elway

Denver Broncos

Another classmate from 1983, Elway is the complete package as a quarterback. He has one of the strongest arms in the league, he's quick on his feet and able to scramble, and he's a smart leader. He's the type of player who fathers hope their sons will grow into when they get older. Elway has it all except a Super Bowl ring, and if the Denver Broncos don't win the Super Bowl this year, they have no excuses and nobody to blame but themselves.

4. Troy Aikman

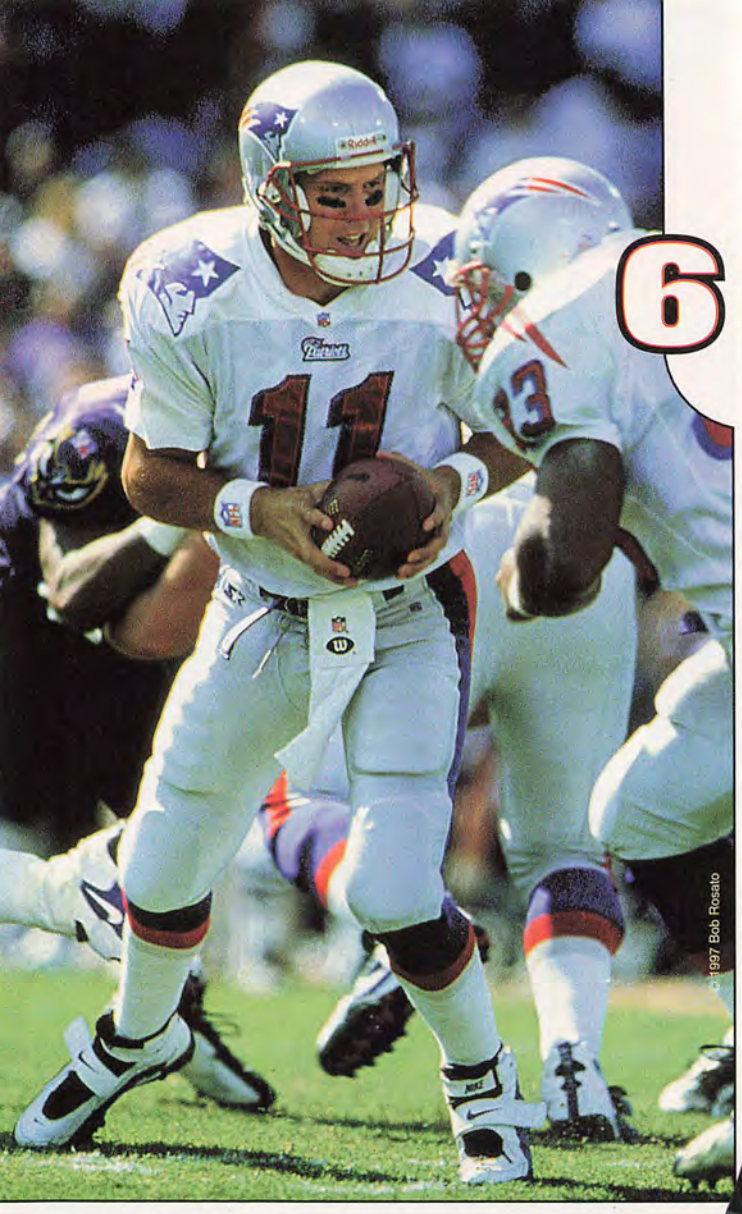
Dallas Cowboys

Aikman is an excellent quarterback who's led his team to championship after championship. He's a guy who stands in the pocket, has a quick release and a cannon arm. He may be a little frustrated with all the things that have gone on around him in Dallas, but any quarterback would be frustrated if he had so much off-the-field interference thrust upon his team. But Aikman is somehow able to put all of that aside, and while I'm sure it burns inside of him, he's still the leader of that team. Troy is a born leader. He makes it a point to make sure everybody on the team knows where he's coming from, and the Cowboys need somebody like that. We'll see if Dallas can get it together for the playoffs, but it's not just up to Troy Aikman. Everybody on the team must take care of their own business and look within themselves. That's the bottom line.

5. Steve Young

San Francisco 49ers

When Young arrived in



San Francisco, he was able to study behind the great Joe Montana, and now he's one of the best quarterbacks in the league. When Young is healthy, he can do it all. He's blessed to be in a great offensive system with the greatest receiver of all time, and if you talk to any of the other quarterbacks, they're a little bit jealous, but Young works the offense to perfection. There is a lot of talk about how much longer he'll choose to play the game, but Young is just like most quarterbacks and will play until the game isn't fun anymore. One of the reasons I got out of the game is because I wasn't enjoying it as much as I used to. Then when I received my umpteenth concussion, I knew it was time for me to hang it up.

6. Drew Bledsoe

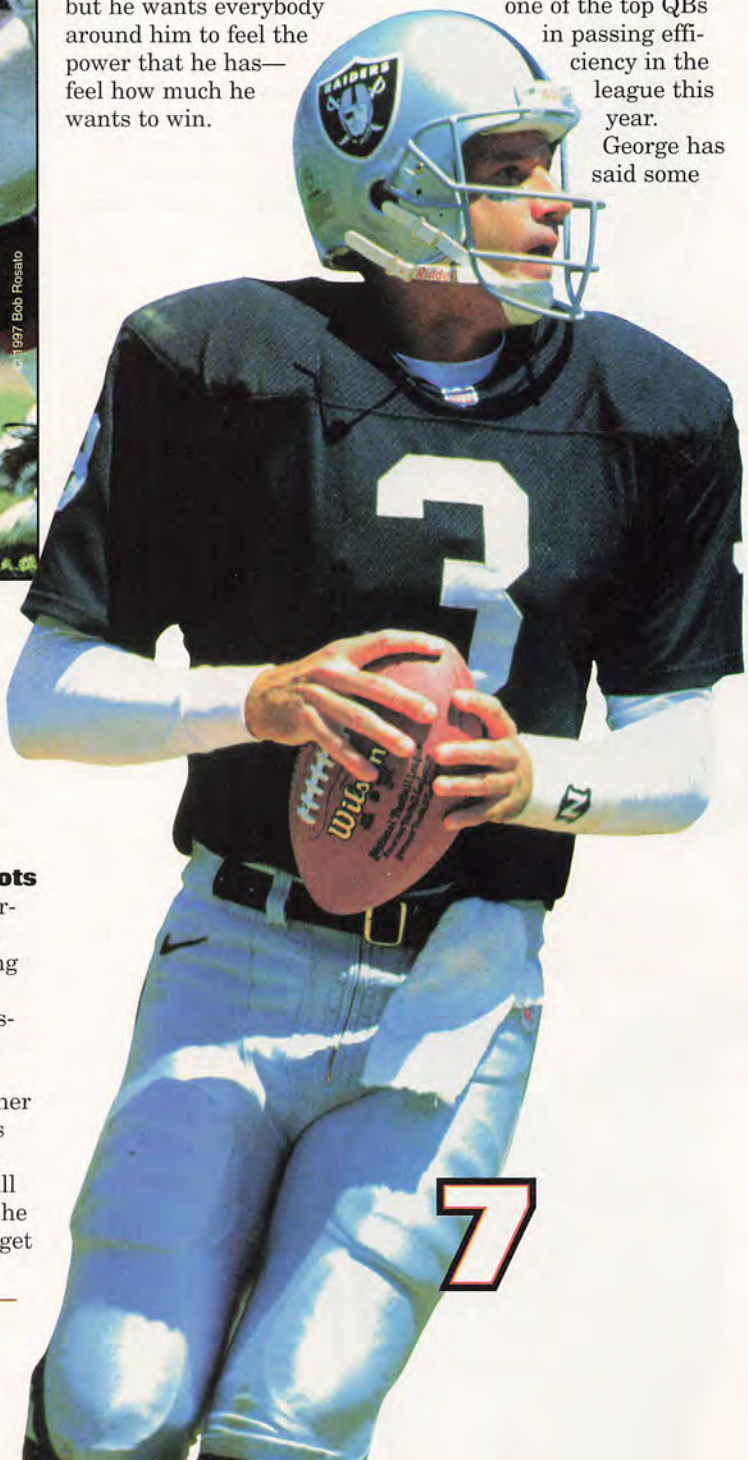
New England Patriots

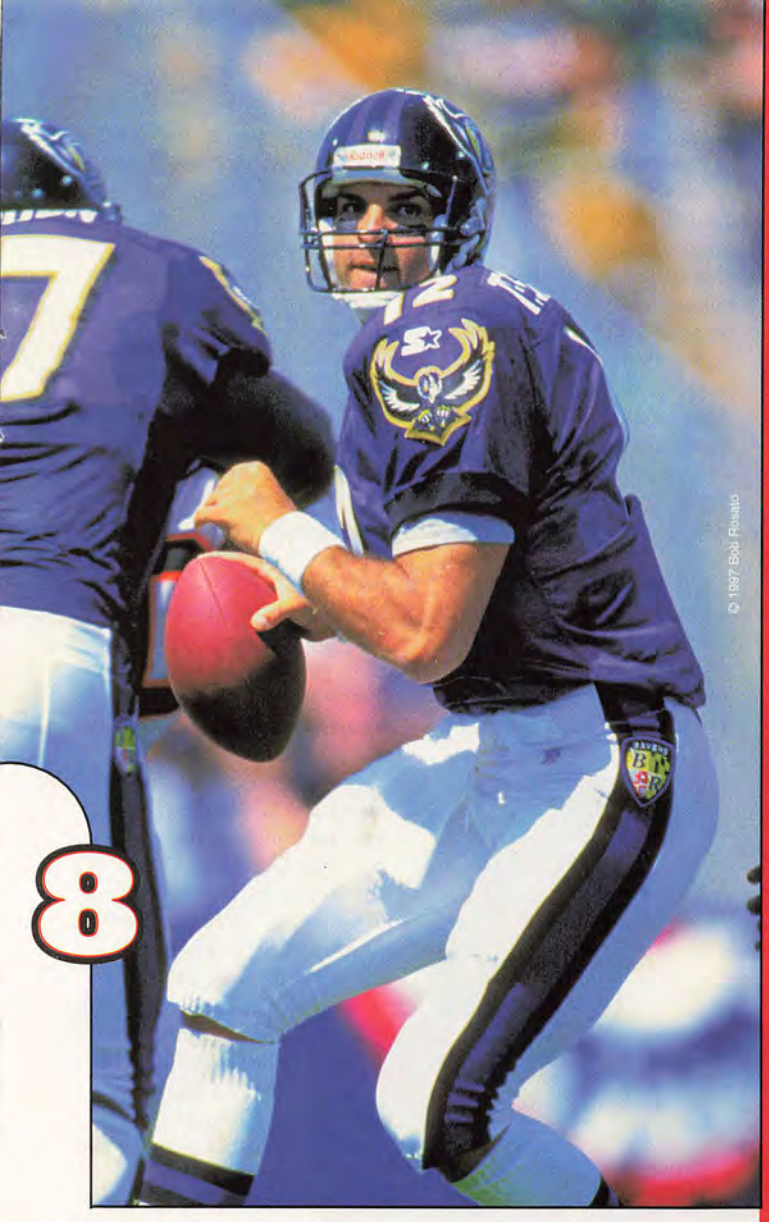
Bledsoe is a young quarterback with all the tools and he has a great running back behind him, but he puts a little too much pressure on himself to go out there and be the best instead of letting some other people help him. Bledsoe's such a competitor that he wants to be able to do it all on his own, and at times, he realizes that his arm can get the job done. But sometimes, he gets himself in trouble trying to do too much. That's been more prevalent this season, because he realizes how close the Patriots were to winning it all last year. I remember back when I went to the Super Bowl for the first and second times, I found myself trying to make the big play when it wasn't there because I wanted to help us win so much. Bledsoe's not the type of guy that wants to walk in the limelight or strut his stuff, but he wants everybody around him to feel the power that he has—feel how much he wants to win.

7. Jeff George

Oakland Raiders

When George signed with the Raiders, he was put into the perfect situation. He's got the cannon arm that fits exactly what the Raiders want him to do, and that's stretch defenses. More than anything, the Raiders need to have a complete game. Their defense struggles at times, but their offense is solid, so George is definitely helping them. Plenty of negative things have been said about George, but he's been one of the top QBs in passing efficiency in the league this year. George has said some





things in the past he shouldn't have—things that have gotten him into trouble—but the bottom line is that he wants to win.

8. Vinny Testaverde
Baltimore Ravens

Testaverde is finally getting some serious coaching by somebody who knows his strengths. In talking to Ravens head coach Ted Marchibroda, one thing Testaverde has learned how to do is watch film. In the past, he watched it more as a fan rather than as a guy who makes his living reading defenses. He was taught how to study corners and look at the angles of the safeties, and he's starting to learn the system.

Testaverde's biggest downfall was not having the type of coaching that Marchibroda and Don Strock are providing. The coaches he's had in the past are not necessarily bad coaches, but he needed somebody to teach him how to study the game of football.

9. Warren Moon
Seattle Seahawks

At 41 years old and starting for the Seahawks, Moon continues to have a strong arm, and his football mind is still sharp. The only question surrounding him is whether he can take the pounding. By looking at him, though, you'd think he's 30 years old. He remains in top shape and he's probably one of the best-conditioned quarterbacks in the league. Moon could play for another five years and he'd still be in my top 10.

Picked off!

FOR ALL OF HIS SUCCESS, THERE'S ONE DEFENDER WHO ALWAYS HAD JIM KELLY'S NUMBER

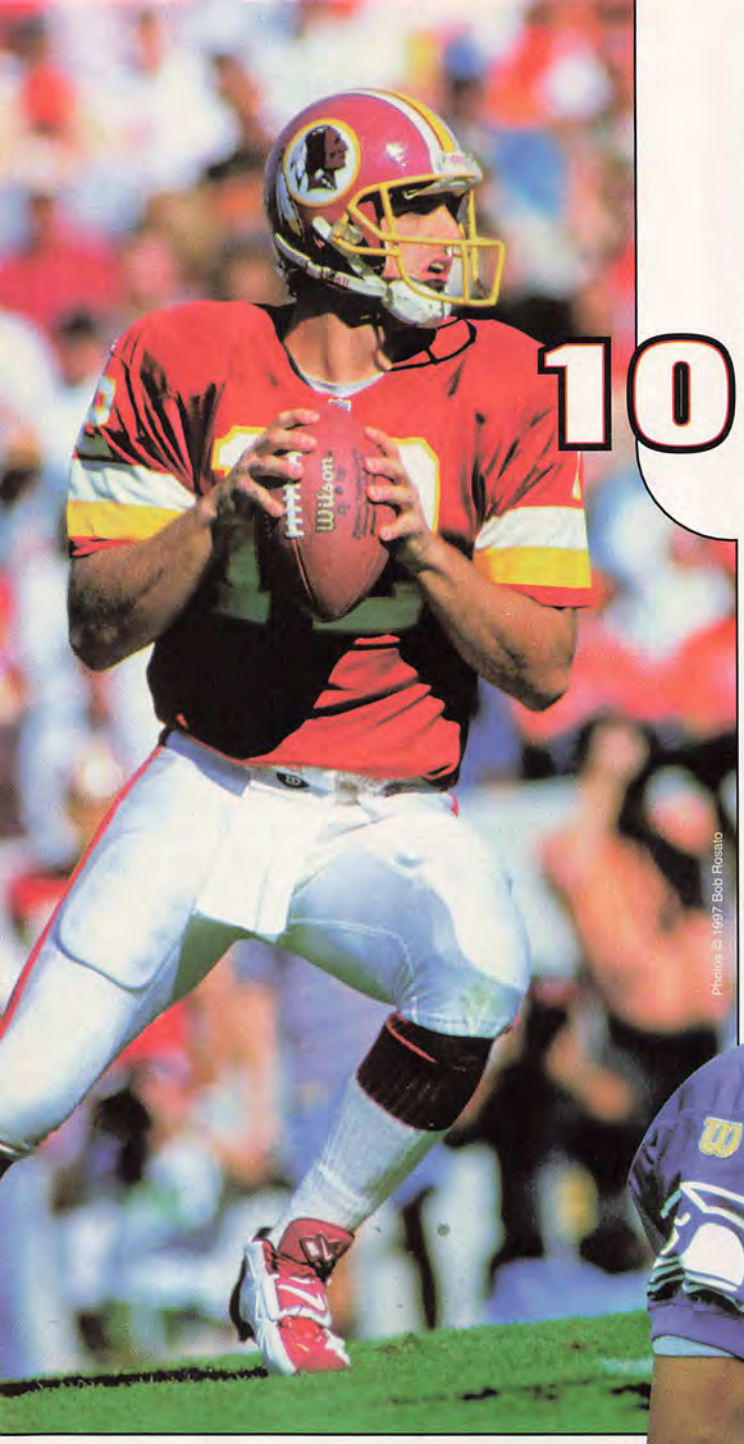
I've never been frightened to face anyone on the football field, but there's one defender I hated to see on the other side of the field more than anyone else in the sport—Fred Marion.

While a lot of you are probably saying, "Fred who?" right about now, Marion was a free safety for the New England Patriots from 1982 to '91, and I played with him at the University of Miami. He knew everything I was going to do, and it didn't matter what I did to try to hide it. He always knew where I was throwing the football, and he's intercepted more balls off me than anybody else. Every time we played them, that son of a gun would get an interception.

I'd mess with him all the time and ask, "Damn Fred, how'd you know?"

He'd just say, "Maybe when I retire, I'll tell you."

He's been retired for five years, and I still don't know how he did it. He was a heck of a player. ✖



Photos © 1997 Bob Rosato

10. Gus Frerotte
Washington Redskins

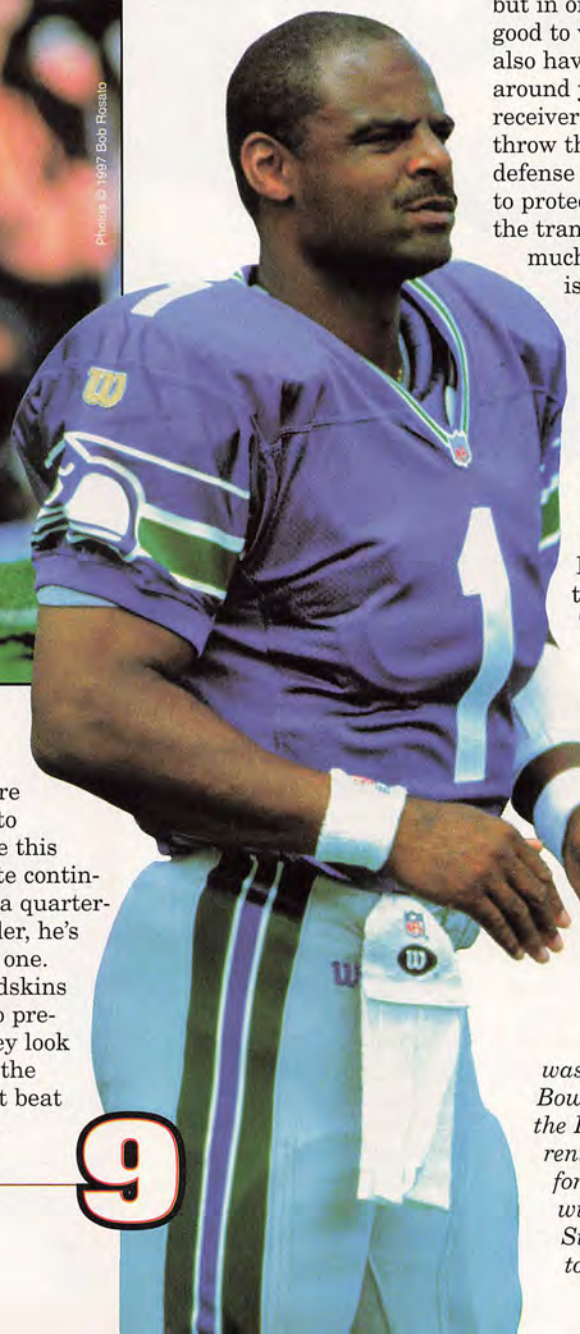
Frerotte is from my neck of the woods in western Pennsylvania, and when you talk about all the western Pennsylvania quarterbacks—Montana, Marino, Kelly, Namath—I hope Frerotte gets put in this category in the near future. He has all the tools in the world, and once he gets the Washington Redskins together and they get on a roll, they're going to be tough to beat. It may not be this year, but if Frerotte continues to improve as a quarterback and as a leader, he's going to be a good one. Right now, the Redskins are a hard team to predict. One week they look unbelievable, and the next week they get beat by a weaker team.

Kordell Stewart
Honorable Mention

Stewart is one guy that almost slipped in and might be in my top 10 by the end of the season. He doesn't have a complete grasp of being an NFL quarterback as far as developing his passing skills, but week by week, month by month, he continues to get better. He's learning by on-the-job training, and I love to watch him play. He's exciting.

There's a lot of talent at the quarterback position in the NFL, and there are actually about 15 players who could be in the top 10. As the older guys move on and the younger ones get more experience, excellent quarterbacks like Mark Brunell, Kerry Collins, Trent Dilfer, Todd Collins and Elvis Grbac may eventually take a place among the elite passers of the league. It's always tough for top prospects to thrive in the NFL because coming out of college, the best players go to the teams with the worst records. Anytime a young quarterback is thrown to the wolves with a team that's not very good, it hurts, because he doesn't develop the confidence in himself that is so important. There are plenty of good quarterbacks in the league, but in order to move from good to very good, you must also have the right people around you. Having a receiver like Andre Reed to throw the ball to or a tough defense led by Bruce Smith to protect a lead can make the transition to the NFL much smoother. Football is a team sport, and there's not a better one out there.

I had 11 great years of playing the game in the National Football League. I played with a Hall of Fame coach and Hall of Fame players on my team with the Bills. There was also no better home-field advantage than playing in Buffalo—80,000 screaming western New Yorkers. That's what you want to be around. ✖



Jim Kelly, who was a four-time Super Bowl quarterback with the Buffalo Bills, is currently a football analyst for NBC. He worked with editor Mike Stokes in putting together this article.

Sacked!

In the rough-and-tumble NFL, backup quarterbacks are always one hit away from the spotlight.

Whether it's injury or ineptitude, the backup quarterback typically appears on the field only in times of crisis. Usually these high-priced bench-warmers help relay plays and strategies to the higher-priced on-field generals, but with the zone blitz becoming a basic form of sustenance for defenses around the league, the incidence of game-ending injuries against the NFL's golden boys have made the role of the backup quarterback even more invaluable. With even the best teams just one bone-rattling hit away from postseason defeat, MVP has compiled a list of the best arms to turn to when reinforcements are necessary as well as a list of the non-starters who couldn't get it going if their lives depended on it. —by Steve Harris

the Good

Warren Moon

(Seattle Seahawks) - An absolute steal in the off-season to back up the team's questionable starter, Jon Friesz, Moon has matured like the finest wines, growing better as each year passes. Singularly responsible for turning around the Seattle franchise in the backup role, Moon may not have time on his side, but he does have the talents to make him one of the best quarterbacks to play the game in 1997.

Rob Johnson

(Jacksonville Jaguars) - Was it the system or was it the gutty performances that have made Johnson the best quarterback to not be starting on a regular basis this year? If Mark Brunell put up consistent 300-plus yard efforts, you might be able to argue the issue, but the second-year backup has both the arm and the accuracy to take snaps full-time. Look for Johnson to become a valuable commodity for the Jaguars come draft day 1998.

Glenn Foley

(New York Jets) - The truest example of a football "closer" this sport has seen in some time, Foley has provided the Jets with the spark to rebound from the Neil O'Donnell daze that has overcome the team from time to time this season. Foley has been impressive against the Patriots and was officially named the team's starter in Week 10 by Bill Parcells. O'Donnell has a pretty hefty salary to play backup for long.

Jeff Hostetler

(Washington Redskins) - A Super Bowl veteran with the skills to keep a team in the game, Hostetler expressed reservations about the backup position after being tossed by the Raiders for the nuclear-powered arm of Jeff George. His skills, despite his age, are worthy of a starting position, and he does want to play, which is probably why he chose to sign with the Redskins—a team that has given new meaning to quarterback controversy.

Steve Bono

(Green Bay Packers) - Bono's not going to see many snaps playing behind the durable Brett Favre, but he is the consummate backup. Bono lacks the skills to go an entire season, but he sure can look great for a few series. While his conditioning is suspect, his ability to put up wins in the reserve role (he finished his starting career with the Kansas City Chiefs 21-9) is impressive.

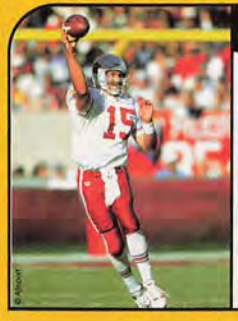
the bad and the Ugly

Rick Mirer

(Chicago Bears) - The captain of Seattle's offense for three years before his benching last season, Mirer came to Chicago to step in for the injured Eric Kramer in exchange for the Bears' No. 1 pick. After struggling to learn the offense (as well as the basics of the position) during training camp, the starter became a backup who would later become a starter only to lose his job to Kramer and the backup role to Steve Stenstrom.

Billy Joe Hobert

(Buffalo Bills) - Hobert more than made up for his lack of communication on the field with great dialogue among reporters. Unfortunately, he felt compelled to explain his poor performance in Week 7 by admitting he really didn't study the game plan against the Patriots. Asked to sub for an injured Todd Collins, Hobert threw two interceptions in his first three passes and, in the process, threw away his career.



Stoney Case

(Arizona Cardinals) - After being picked to replace an injured Kent Graham in Week 9, Stoney became a head Case with boasts worthy of Brett Favre. Not only did he begin telling anyone who'd listen that he should replace Graham permanently, he also started criticizing others on the team. After a lackluster performance during the first half of his first start against Philadelphia, Case returned to the bench.

Tony Graziani

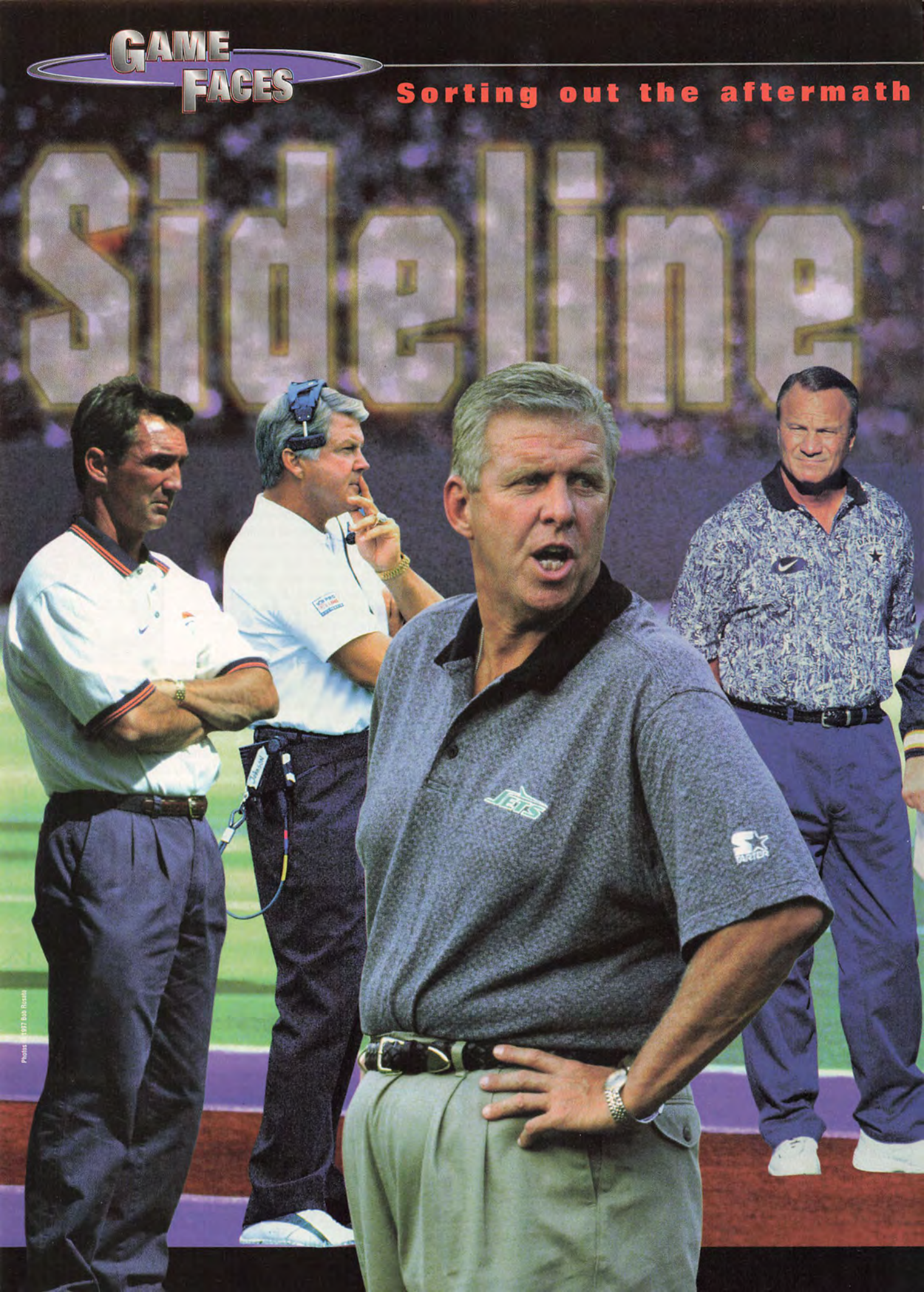
(Atlanta Falcons) - Wearing the unlucky No. 13 for the even less fortunate Falcons, Graziani was a late-round draft pick tabbed by coach Dan Reeves to replace the ineffective Billy Joe Tolliver (who himself was stepping in for the ineffective and injury-prone Chris Chandler). Graziani was mauled by the zone blitzing schemes of the Carolina Panthers on his way to a dismal 24-yard effort.

New Orleans Saints QBs

The entire New Orleans Saints quarterback roster is one of the most pitiful groups of arms ever to play on one team in the NFL, CFL or Arena league. With the lousy play of Heath Shuler, Danny Wuerffel, Doug Nussmeier and Jim Miller, it's tough to tell who the starter is supposed to be. The members of this sorry quartet are on their way to playing themselves out of (and Peyton Manning into) the league.

Sorting out the aftermath

Sideline



Photos © 1997 Bob Rosato

of the great head coaching shuffle of 1997

Stalkers

BY MIKE SANDROLINI AND MIKE STOKES

IF it were up to coaches to win football games, there'd be a lot less concussions and a lot more broken hips. But after the revolving door stopped spinning in a dizzying off-season of coaching roulette, it became clear that while coaches are no substitute for quarterbacks, they are as important as helmet decals and team colors in establishing team identity.

A staggering 11 clubs opened camp this season with a new man barking orders from the executive golf cart. In fact, there have been so many shuffles over the past three seasons, expansion team coaches Dom Capers and Tom Coughlin have become elder statesmen in the NFL with more tenure than over half the coaches in the league.

While everyone, including the biggest egomaniacs of the bunch, agrees that football games are won by the guys wearing numbers on their shirts, why is so much emphasis placed on the guy pacing the sidelines? Easy. Champions are not built overnight, and without a playoffs-caliber team on the field or the promise of better days ahead, fans have been known to disguise themselves as empty seats.

The right coach has a way of breathing new

Dressed for Success

Most Valuable Player: the coach or the clothier?

NFL teams will try anything to gain an edge over the competition, and if that means dumping everything from the coach to the uniforms, so be it. In light of the recent turnaround of Tampa Bay which, after dumping the swashbuckling Buccaneer Bruce for the much more intimidating skull and swords logo has gone from doormat to world-beater overnight, the MVP brain trusts donned their thinking helmets to determine what has more impact on a team—new clothes or a new coach. Comparing a random sampling of the first-year records of teams after sporting new duds against the first-year records of the franchises' all-time winningest coach, our not-so-scientific research team has determined that clothes do indeed make the man.

UNIFORMS			COACH
1981: After earning their stripes, Bengals win new respect—and an AFC championship	Earning Stripes +6	Sam Wyche -1	1984: Before taking Cincy to Super Bowl XXIII, quirky coach first leads team below .500
1978: Jets take flight after going with green helmet and aeronautically-correct, new logo	Plane Existence +5	Weeb Ewbank +0	1963: Though he'd lead New York to two titles, Weeb hardly wobbles record in debut
1973: Touch of gold changes Rams from a fading club into a shining division champ	Horns of Gold +6	John Robinson +3*	1983: Robinson reaps wins with some help from a roboback named Eric Dickerson
1993: With snazzy, streamlined, new logo, New England hears last of Pat-sies jokes	Streamlined +3	Mike Holovak +0	1962: Ho-hum Holovak hangs around long enough to become club's winningest coach
1962: Mortifying mustard and brown gives way to orange, blue and more wins to boot	Orange Crush +4	Dan Reeves +2	1981: What could he have done with Elway *and* a new logo? The world will never know
1960: Team adorns drab helmets with Lions logo, roars to three straight winning seasons	Helmet Sticker +4	Wayne Fontes +3	1989: Catches team on upswing before Wayne's world finally comes crashing down
1990: Falcons ditch candyland red for renegade black and are back in playoffs a year later	Fade to Black +2	Leeman Bennett +3	1977: Only Atlanta coach with winning record had Steve Bartkowski, weak division on his side
1963: Adopting modern Giants logo surely stopped further decline of luckless New York	Letter Carriers -2	Steve Owen -6	1931: Owen takes Giants to middle of road before leading team to eight title games in 14 years
UNIFORMS 28		FINAL SCORE	COACHES 4

* Record compared against full 1981 season because 1982 was one of those pathetic strike-shortened years.

Writer, Robinson, Reeves, Fontes and B. Sanders photos © Allsport; D. Sanders, Bennett and Timmerman photos © Bob Rosato; Holovak photo © Dick Raphael; Bengals player provided by Gary Langenbrunner; all black and white photos courtesy of teams

life into fading franchises. Young players assume the values and competitive fire of coaches they can believe in, while veterans are inspired by the thought of a new system that could lead them to a Super Bowl before their careers come to an end. Coaches in the '90s are asked to wear many hats ranging from master strategist to master of ceremonies, but above all, they are asked to win.

-THE GURUS-

It's no wonder that Jacksonville chose a guy like Tom Coughlin and Carolina enlisted the help of Dom Capers to set the tone of the NFL's newest organizations. Although they approached the challenge in different ways—Coughlin built through the draft and Capers through free agency—both are strict disciplinarian-type coaches who know the kind of team they want and the type of players needed to carry out the master plan of winning a Super Bowl.

"No matter how much we talk about organizations and coaches and new uniforms and all those things, it depends on who you put 'em on," says former Oakland Raiders coach John Madden. "It's a player's game. Eventually, they have to go out on the field and play the game. And the team with the best players will usually win. The most important thing a guy can bring to a team is players. You have to have a plan and you have to know what you want, and then get the players to get on the same page."

That is the overriding philosophy of two of the league's highest profile coaches, New York's Bill Parcells and Miami's Jimmy Johnson. No one is better at shaking sedentary foundations by cutting dead weight and discovering young talent than these two. Perhaps their best work is done on draft day where Parcells works to monopolize the event and where Johnson looks like a kid in a candy store even in the late rounds.

More grand poobah than head coach of the Jets, Parcells immediately slashed away at his roster, keeping players who were willing to conform to the ideals of his dictatorship and launching those who so much as hesitated. He then flexed his organizational muscle by trading away the top draft pick for more draft picks and then trading those away for even more draft picks.

With Parcells in charge, it took the Jets just three games to win twice as many games as they did all of last

season—one—and the team has undergone a noticeable metamorphosis, from an underachieving, backstabbing bunch into one that's gaining confidence and has a purpose.

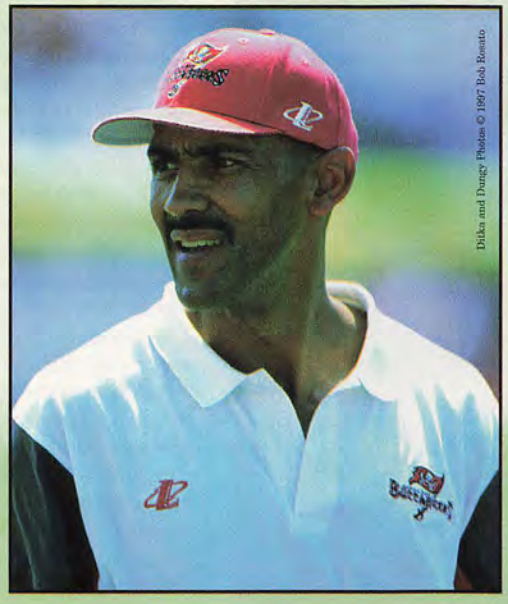
"What I have to do is elevate the expectations of the players to those that I have," says the Tuna. "That's what I have to convince this team to do. I have to get their expectations up to mine. I'm always the same way until I know I got guys thinking the same way I want them to think. Don't confuse that with bullying players."

Having initiated similar tactics with the Cowboys, Johnson is no stranger to thumbing his nose at the status quo and saying to hell with any tradition that isn't his own. He suffered through some miserable seasons in Dallas en route to building the dynasty of the decade. Now Johnson is convinced he can do it again with the Dolphins.

"I talked to Charles Haley when he first got down to Dallas, and he said, 'Man, I've never seen so many players,' " recalls former 49ers All-Pro safety Ronnie Lott. "When he saw the talent that they had, it was just a matter of bringing them together and all of a sudden, you're a great coach."

Of the younger generation of head coaches in the league, no one has done a better job of bringing good players together than Tampa Bay's second-year man Tony Dungy. Accomplishing the seemingly impossible with a team that even the daring Johnson balked at the chance of coaching, Dungy has instilled a winning attitude in his Buccaneers players to end Tampa Bay's 13-year reign as the supreme doormat of the NFC.

"Everybody told [me] about all the problems and the 10 or 12 years of losing and all the negatives there," Dungy says, "but any situation you go into, it's gonna be like that for the most part. You're gonna inherit a team that hasn't done well. I didn't see any reason why we couldn't win and I knew they had a lot of really good players."



TURNAROUND: Iron Mike Ditka (above) plans to turn the Saints into winners as quickly as Tony Dungy (inset) rebuilt the Buccaneers image

Despite posting a 6-10 record (which turned out to be worse than Sam Wyche's final 7-9 season with the club), there was reason for optimism as the Bucs won five of their last seven contests in '96 and their defense started playing with the same intensity as Dungy teams in Kansas City, Minnesota and Pittsburgh.

"We just have guys who are more familiar with what we're doing now, and we're more familiar with them and what they can do well," says Dungy of the Bucs' turnaround. "Also, I think the last two draft classes that we've had, their influx is showing and the young guys are coming on and making some plays for us."

As Dungy has done in Tampa Bay, Ditka plans to do down on the Bayou. Another slash-and-burn head coach, Ditka cut payroll, cut the starting quarterback, and after the Saints' 30 turnovers in eight games, thought about cutting his own wrists to put an end to the misery.

Abandoning his short-lived "Mellow Mike" persona during a fire-and-brimstone locker room eruption three-and-a-half games into the regular season, Iron Mike returned with a flourish. The Halas Bear and Landry disciple in Da Coach joined forces to strike fear into the heart of his underachiev-

ing bunch and they responded by opening a Louisiana can of whup-ass on Detroit with a 35-17 victory in Week 5 and an emotional fourth-quarter win against Chicago in Soldier Field the following week.

"I believe in this team," Ditka says. "I'm not going to quit believing in this team. We are the New Orleans Saints. We play as a team and stay together as a team and we'll continue to work."

While New Orleans may still be a long way off from its first playoffs win, the fiery Ditka is at least making Saints football fun again.

-THE CARETAKERS-

While the coaches charged with rebuilding teams have a daunting task ahead of them, it's the new coaches inheriting a wealth of talent and tradition who are pressured not only to win, but to win big.

No one knows this better than Dallas coach Barry Switzer. Despite taking the 'Boys to a Super Bowl victory in his second season with the club, he is still battling the ghost of Johnson and the overbearing presence of owner Jerry Jones.

As the new head coach of the orphaned AFC champion Patriots, Pete Carroll is quietly doing a masterful job of getting as much out of the players he inherited from Parcells without having to resort to strong-willed measures. Drew Bledsoe, in particular, is one player who doesn't seem to miss Parcells' dominating personality one bit.

"With Pete, it's easier to go out and play the game instead of working the game," says Bledsoe. "That's what [Carroll has] tried to get across to this team. You should have fun."

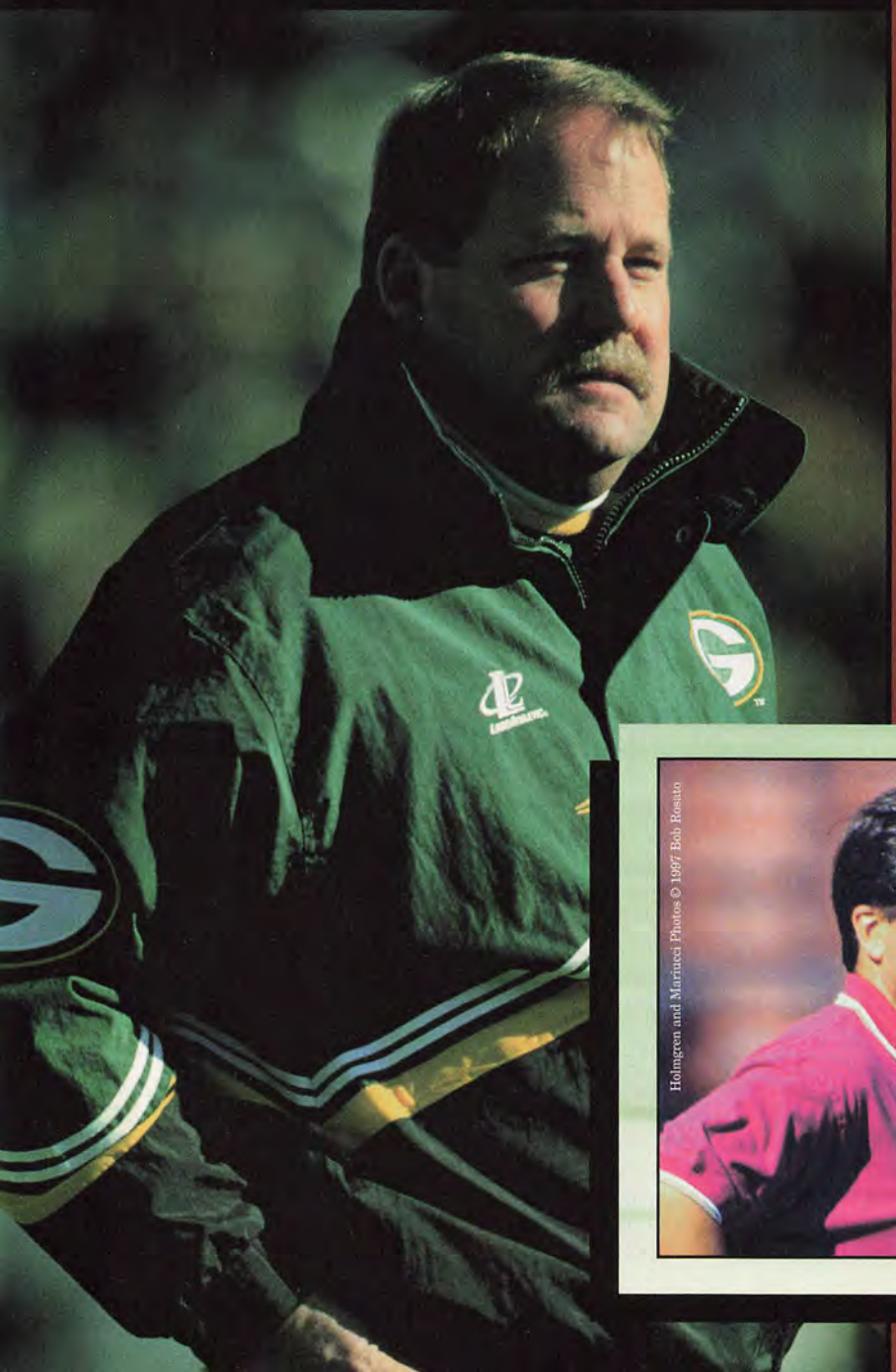
Just as when Switzer took over the team that Jimmy built, in trying not to screw up the team that the Tuna built, the discipline instilled by the former coach has a tendency to slide. For Dallas, that problem manifested itself in off-field shenanigans. In the case of the Patriots, the breakdown in discipline is more subtle. It shows up in the form of sporadic lacks of focus and silly penalties which can cost the team a return trip to the Super Bowl. If Carroll crashes the team bus on the way to the Super Bowl, his career in New England may be cut short, but seem very long.

Of all the NFL's new bosses, however, San Francisco's Steve Mariucci should feel the most pressure to win and win quickly. Last season, George Seifert led the 49ers to the playoffs (as he had every year as the franchise's all-time winningest head coach), but saw his team lose in the second round to the eventual Super Bowl champions when his star quarterback tried to play with broken ribs.

Tough luck. That line might work in Detroit, but San Francisco expects to win the Super Bowl every year, and Seifert hadn't delivered one for two straight seasons, so he's out and Mariucci's in. Welcome to the Niners. Gulp.

Not to be deterred, the 42-year-old Mariucci came in with the intent to add a little diversity to the 49ers' offense—translated, run more instead of relying on Steve Young to Jerry Rice. By the end of his regular-season coaching debut, he got his wish—whether he liked it or not. Mariucci lost Rice for the season to a knee injury and prepared the 49ers from week to

NO SURRENDER: Despite key injuries, the Packers' Mike Holmgren (below) and the 49ers' Steve Mariucci (inset) stay on the title track



Holmgren and Mariucci Photos © 1997 Bob Rosato

MVP SPORTS PLAYOFFS REVIEW

SUPER BOWL	SITE	RESULT	MVP	FAST FACTS
XXXI	New Orleans	Green Bay 35, New England 21	KR Desmond Howard, G.B.	Pack wins first Super Bowl in 29 years
XXX	Tempe	Dallas 27, Pittsburgh 17	CB Larry Brown, Dal.	Neil O'Donnell throws two crushing interceptions
XXIX	Miami	San Francisco 49, San Diego 26	QB Steve Young, S.F.	Young throws six touchdowns
XXVIII	Atlanta	Dallas 30, Buffalo 13	RB Emmitt Smith, Dal.	Bills lose fourth straight Super Bowl
XXVII	Pasadena	Dallas 52, Buffalo 17	QB Troy Aikman, Dal.	Cowboys force nine turnovers
XXVI	Minneapolis	Washington 37, Buffalo 24	QB Mark Rypien, Was.	Washington races to 27-10 halftime lead
XXV	Tampa	New York Giants 20 Buffalo 19	RB Ottis Anderson, NYG	Kicker Scott Norwood shank blows it for Buffalo
XXIV	New Orleans	San Francisco 55, Denver 10	QB Joe Montana, S.F.	Montana throws five touchdowns
XXIII	Miami	San Francisco 20, Cincinnati 16	WR Jerry Rice, S.F.	Niners drive 92 yards to win nail-biter
XXII	San Diego	Washington 42, Denver 10	QB Doug Williams, Was.	Redskins' offense dominates Denver with 602 yards
XXI	Pasadena	New York Giants 39, Denver 20	QB Phil Simms, NYG	Giants win first NFL title since 1956
XX	New Orleans	Chicago 46, New England 10	DE Richard Dent, Chi.	Bears' vaunted "46" defense forces six turnovers
XIX	Stanford	San Francisco 38, Miami 16	QB Joe Montana, S.F.	President Ronald Reagan tosses coin
XVIII	Tampa Bay	L.A. Raiders 38, Washington 9	RB Marcus Allen, L.A.	Allen posts record 74-yard TD run
XVII	Pasadena	Washington 27, Miami 17	RB John Riggins, Was.	Played before record crowd of 103,667
XVI	Pontiac	San Francisco 26, Cincinnati 21	QB Joe Montana, S.F.	Bengals derailed by four turnovers
XV	New Orleans	Oakland 27, Philadelphia 10	QB Jim Plunkett, Oak.	Jim Plunkett: 13 completions, 3 touchdowns
XIV	Pasadena	Pittsburgh 31, Los Angeles 19	QB Terry Bradshaw, Pit.	Bradshaw wins back-to-back MVPs
XIII	Miami	Pittsburgh 35, Dallas 31	QB Terry Bradshaw, Pit.	Jackie Smith drops key pass in the end zone
XII	New Orleans	Dallas 27, Denver 10	DT Randy White, DE H.Martin, Dal.	Cowboys' "Doomsday D" allows 35 passing yards
XI	Pasadena	Oakland 32, Minnesota 14	WR Fred Biletnikoff, Oak.	Willie Brown returns interception 75-yards for a TD
X	Miami	Pittsburgh 21, Dallas 17	WR Lynn Swann, Pit.	Swann catches four passes for 161 yards
IX	New Orleans	Pittsburgh 16, Minnesota 6	RB Franco Harris, Pit.	Steelers win first NFL title since 1933
VIII	Houston	Miami 24, Minnesota 7	RB Larry Csonka, Mia.	Csonka runs roughshod with 145 yards on 33 carries
VII	Los Angeles	Miami 14, Washington 7	S Jake Scott, Mia.	Dolphins finish season with a perfect 17-0 record
VI	New Orleans	Dallas 24, Miami 3	QB Roger Staubach, Dal.	Cowboys grind out 252 rushing yards
V	Miami	Baltimore 16, Dallas 13	LB Chuck Howley, Dal.	Jim O'Brien boots game-winner with :05 remaining
IV	New Orleans	Kansas City 23, Minnesota 7	QB Len Dawson, K.C.	Kansas City forces five turnovers
III	Miami	New York Jets 16, Baltimore 7	QB Joe Namath, NYJ	Namath guarantees victory over Colts
II	Miami	Green Bay 33, Oakland 14	QB Bart Starr, G.B.	Vince Lombardi's final game with Packers
I	Los Angeles	Green Bay 35, Kansas City 10	QB Bart Starr, G.B.	Max McGee catches seven passes for 138 yards

Riddell
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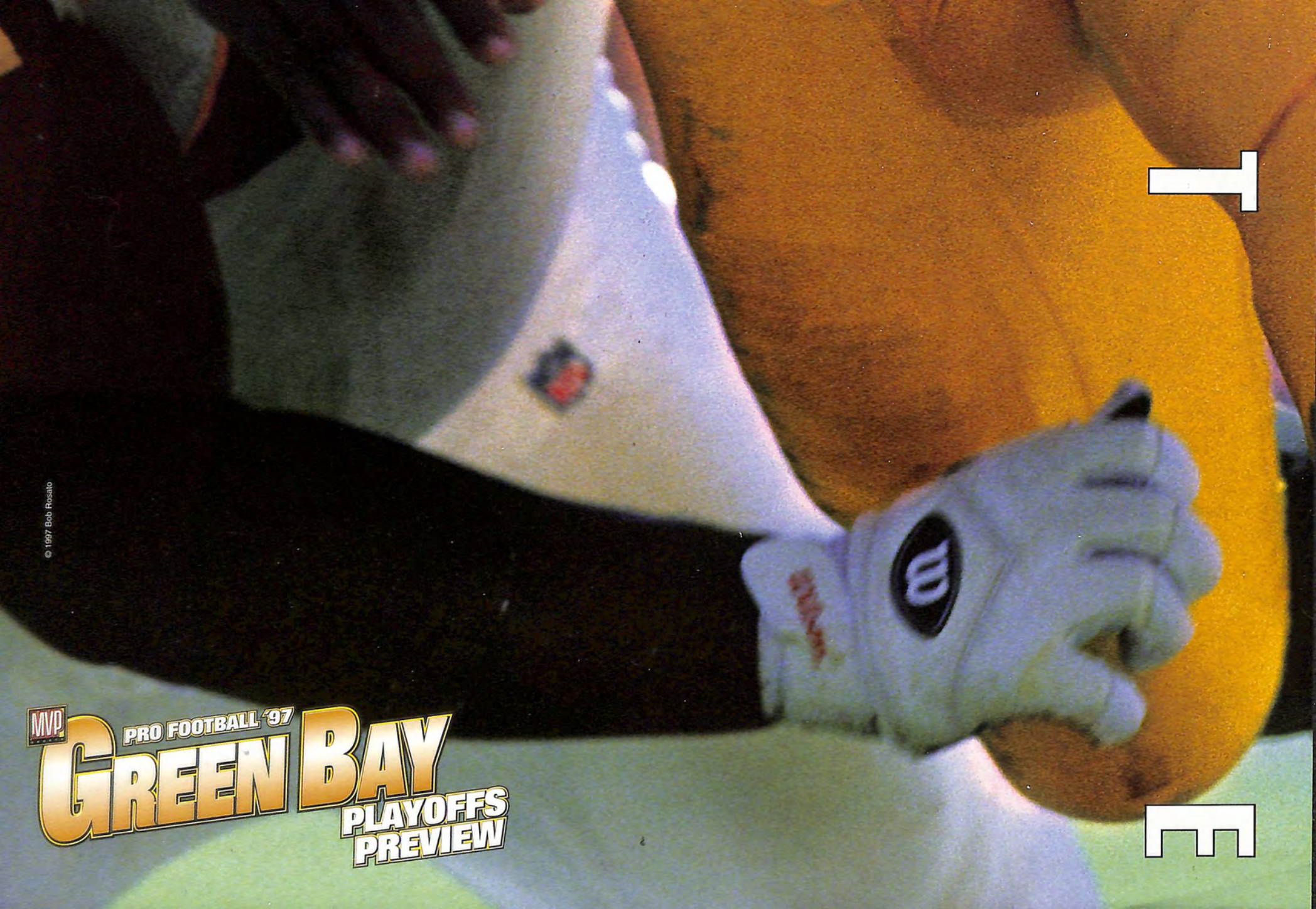
MVP
PRO FOOTBALL '97
GREEN BAY
PLAYOFFS
PREVIEW
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Super Bowl I

GUT CHECK TIME

All-time Postseason Records

AFC

TEAM	W.L.	PCT.	SUPER BOWL	PLAYOFF BERTHS	DIVISION TITLES
Steelers	20-13	.606	4-1	17	13
Dolphins	17-14	.548	2-3	16	11
Raiders	18-12	.600	3-0	15	9
Broncos	9-11	.450	0-4	11	8
Oilers	7-10	.411	0-0	10	2
Browns/Ravens	4-10	.285	0-0	10	6
Bills	12-11	.521	0-4	8	7
Colts	6-7	.461	1-0	8	5
Chiefs	3-8	.272	0-0	8	3
Chargers	6-7	.461	0-1	7	5
Bengals	5-7	.416	0-2	7	5
Patriots	5-7	.416	0-2	7	3
Jets	3-5	.375	0-0	5	0
Seahawks	3-4	.428	0-0	4	1
Jaguars	2-1	.666	0-0	1	0

NFC

TEAM	W.L.	PCT.	SUPER BOWL	PLAYOFF BERTHS	DIVISION TITLES
Cowboys	31-15	.673	5-3	20	14
49ers	22-12	.647	5-0	17	15
Vikings	11-17	.392	0-3	17	12
Rams	10-14	.416	0-1	14	8
Redskins	18-10	.642	3-2	13	5
Bears	7-9	.437	1-0	10	6
Eagles	5-10	.333	0-1	10	2
Giants	10-5	.666	2-0	7	3
Lions	1-7	.125	0-0	7	3
Packers	8-5	.727	1-0	6	3
Falcons	2-5	.285	0-0	5	1
Saints	0-4	.000	0-0	4	1
Buccaneers	1-3	.250	0-0	3	2
Cardinals	0-3	.000	0-0	3	2
Panthers	1-1	.500	0-0	1	1

PASSING

PLAYER	ATT.	COMP.	PCT. COMP.	YDS.	AVG. GAIN	TDS.	PCT. TDS.	INT.	PCT. INT.	RATING
Bart Starr	213	130	61.0	1753	8.23	15	7.0	3	1.4	104.8
Troy Aikman	415	276	66.5	3372	8.13	22	5.3	13	3.1	96.0
Joe Montana	734	460	62.7	5772	7.86	45	6.1	21	2.9	95.6
Brett Favre	317	194	61.2	2430	7.67	18	5.7	7	2.2	94.7
Ken Anderson	166	110	66.3	1321	7.96	9	5.4	6	3.6	93.5
Joe Theismann	211	128	60.7	1782	8.45	11	5.2	7	3.3	91.4
Steve Young	334	207	62.0	2381	7.13	15	4.5	7	2.1	89.7
Warren Moon	403	259	64.3	2870	7.12	17	4.2	14	3.5	84.9
Ken Stabler	351	203	57.8	2641	7.52	19	5.4	13	3.7	84.2
Bernie Kosar	270	152	56.3	1953	7.23	16	5.9	10	3.7	83.5

RECEIVING

PLAYER	NO.	YDS.	AVG.	LONG	TDS
Jerry Rice	120	1742	14.5	72	18
Michael Irvin	83	1283	15.5	53	8
Andre Reed	80	1169	14.6	72	9
Thurman Thomas	75	669	8.9	27	5
Cliff Branch	73	1289	17.7	72	5
Fred Biletnikoff	70	1167	16.7	57	10
Art Monk	69	1062	15.4	48	7
Drew Pearson	67	1105	16.5	83	8
Tony Nathan	65	649	10.0	39	2
Roger Craig	63	606	9.6	40	2

SACKS

PLAYER	SACKS
Bruce Smith	12.0
Charles Haley	11.0
Reggie White	11.0
Richard Dent	10.5
Charles Mann	10.0
Tony Tolbert	10.0
Jeff Wright	9.0
Kevin Greene	8.5
Dexter Manley	8.0
Mark Gastineau	7.5
Greg Townsend	7.5

RUSHING

PLAYER	ATT.	YDS.	AVG.	LONG	TDS
Franco Harris	400	1556	3.9	50	16
Emmitt Smith	318	1413	4.4	38	18
Thurman Thomas	327	1399	4.3	40	15
Tony Dorsett	302	1383	4.6	53	9
Marcus Allen	255	1310	5.1	74	11
John Riggins	251	996	4.0	43	12
Larry Csonka	225	891	4.0	49	9
Chuck Foreman	229	860	3.8	62	7
Roger Craig	208	841	4.0	80	7
Earnest Byner	186	839	4.5	66	5

INTERCEPTIONS

PLAYER	INT.
Ronnie Lott	9
Bill Simpson	9
Charlie Waters	9
Lester Hayes	8
Willie Brown	7
Dennis Thurman	7
Bobby Bryant	6
Eric Davis	6
Glen Edwards	6
Cliff Harris	6
Vernon Perry	6

week not knowing if Young, who suffered a concussion in the season-opener, could be a hit away from the broadcast booth. Keeping Young healthy quickly became paramount to Mariucci's plans.

"That was one of the things we were trying to address this year, and for the rest of his career," he says. "Certainly if he's healthy, we feel we can be a very, very explosive offense."

At first glance, Mariucci, with only one year as a head coach at the college level, appears to be out of his league taking over a club with such a storied winning tradition, but after the early injuries, Mariucci impressed 49ers veterans with his poise.

"I think he was really steady through it, [and] showed everybody on the team he wasn't going to crack," Young says. "It was a good test for him to show the veterans on this team what he was made of, and I think he gathered more respect and more players that would follow him."

–THE MIRACLE WORKERS–

While winning is the mark of a successful coach, winning consistently is the mark of greatness. Sadly, injuries and free agency make that difficult, but as far as coaching is concerned, it's also what separates the men from the boys. Over the past few seasons, a handful of top men such as Minnesota's Dennis Green, Buffalo's Marv Levy and Kansas City's Marty Schottenheimer always seem to overcome such setbacks and continue to march toward the postseason.

In addition to coaching the NFL champions, Green Bay's Mike Holmgren has also been managing a M*A*S*H unit at Lambeau Field. Meanwhile, Pittsburgh's Bill Cowher has seen his defense dismantled by free agency as he breaks in a new quarterback on offense.

The youngest of this group, Denver's Mike Shanahan, has dealt with injuries, free agency and mental anguish over the long off-season, yet he hasn't let the Broncos miss a beat in their mission to exorcise the demons from last year's shocking playoffs loss to the Jaguars.

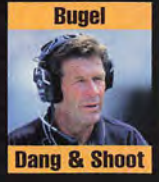
These are the proverbial "players' coaches" who aren't afraid to lecture an MVP after a bad pass or too shy to plant a smooch on a QB/WR/RB after a job well done. Like Landry, Shula and Lombardi before them, they are the class of the league and masters of coaching in the '90s. ✖

GOLDEN RULES

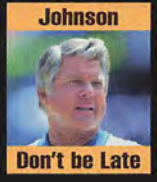
When head coaches go on power trips and take players along for the ride...

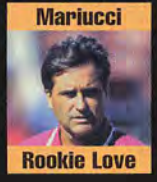
Life would be absolutely perfect if NFL coaches ran the world—just ask them. But until President Tuna is sworn in or Saint Ditka is elected pope, we can only wonder what a lean, mean planet this would be with mandatory two-a-days. Here is a look into the several coaches kingdoms and the laws they've decreed:

	Rule	Exception
Jimmy Johnson Miami Dolphins	If a team member is even one second late for a team meeting, he is not allowed in that meeting	A player is tardy due to a clogged or malfunctioning pump on his bottle of Vitalis Super Hold hairspray
Joe Bugel Oakland Raiders	No swearing in practice, on the field or in the locker room	When that #%@!ing Cole Ford misses an extra point and four field goals
Steve Mariucci San Francisco 49ers	Veteran players are not allowed to haze rookies	If pro-wrestler Kevin Greene and boxing legacy Ken Norton, Jr. decide to have some fun with some whiny third-rounder, who's gonna stop them?
Dom Capers Carolina Panthers	Players are not allowed to miss meals during training camp	No matter how much they beg, the Dallas offensive line is not allowed in the cafeteria
Marty Schottenheimer Kansas City Chiefs	No talking about the day's game after midnight	If MNF Triple OT game runs past midnight, audibles may be whispered
Jeff Fisher Tennessee Oilers	There is no fighting with teammates allowed during practice	The Skins' Michael Westbrook wants to slug the guy who suggested this sissy rule

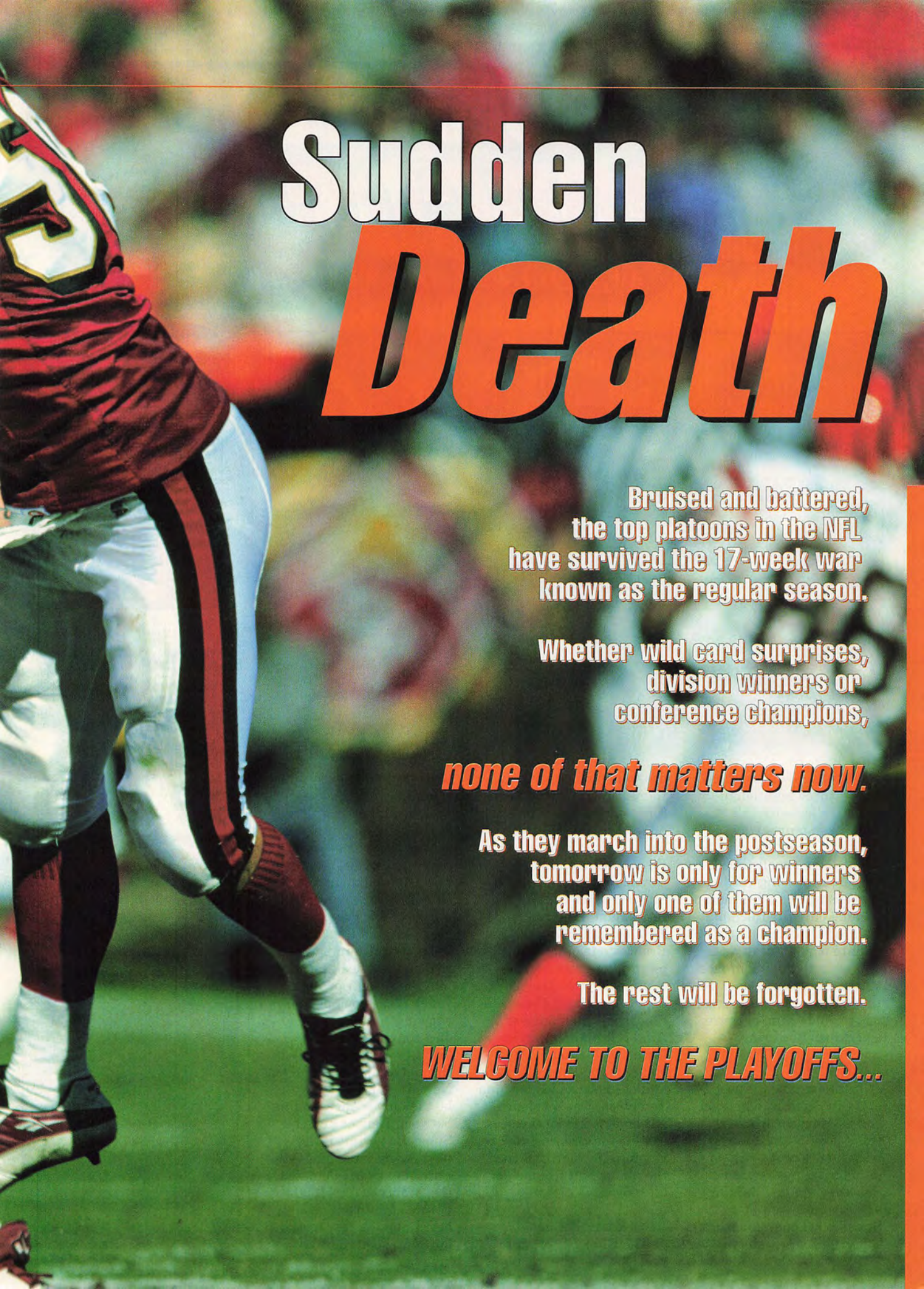

Bugel
Dang & Shoot

Fisher
Play Nice


Johnson
Don't be Late


Mariucci
Rookie Love

Photos © 1997 Bob Rosato



Sudden Death

Bruised and battered,
the top platoons in the NFL
have survived the 17-week war
known as the regular season.

Whether wild card surprises,
division winners or
conference champions,

none of that matters now.

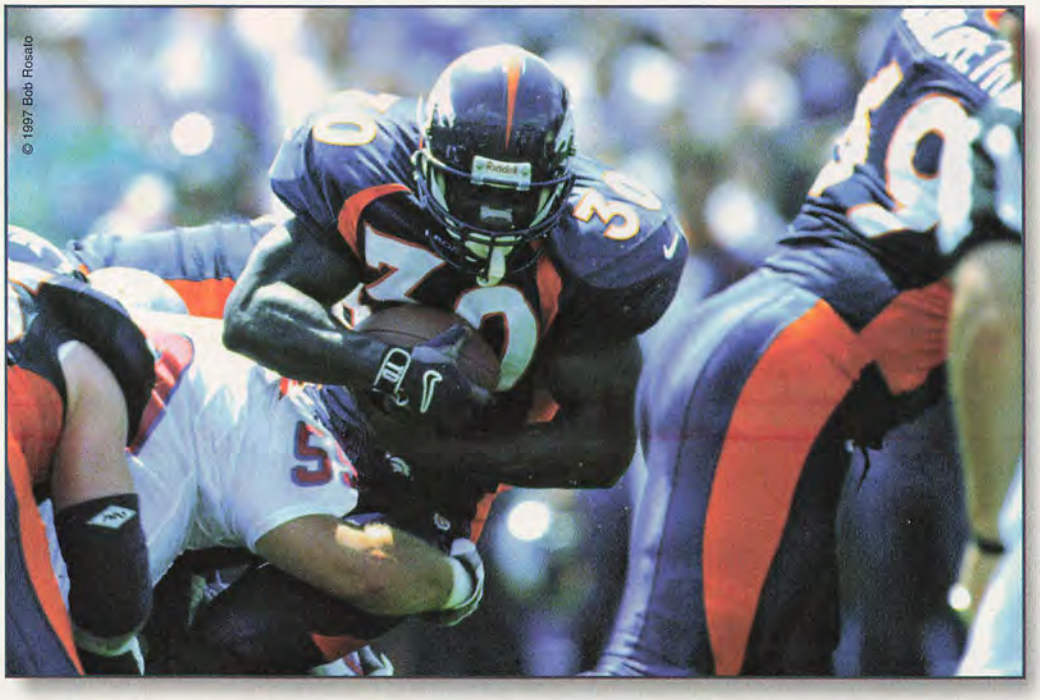
As they march into the postseason,
tomorrow is only for winners
and only one of them will be
remembered as a champion.

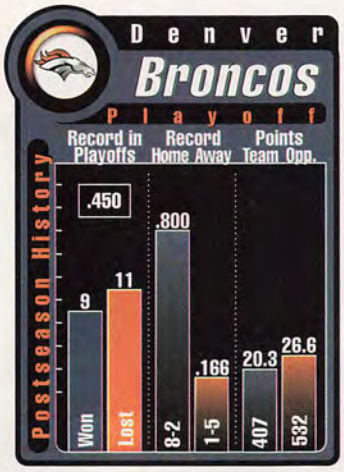
The rest will be forgotten.

WELCOME TO THE PLAYOFFS...

Denver Broncos

AFC WESTERN DIVISION





"I think mentally, we know what we have to do this year." —Terrell Davis

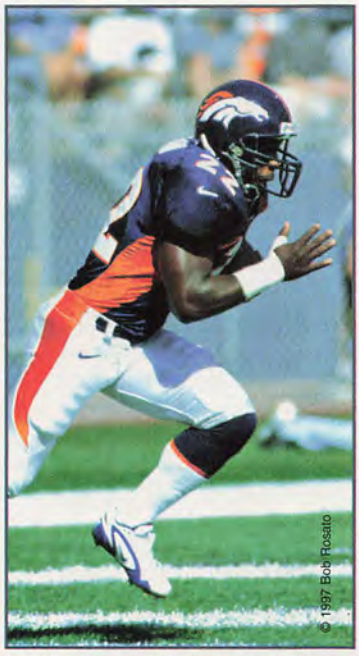
John Elway reached three additional milestones this season on his way to Canton, Ohio: he moved up to No. 2 on the all-time list for career passing yards, surpassing Fran Tarkenton; became only the third player in NFL history to accumulate 50,000 total yards; and became the winningest starting quarterback of all time. The prize that continues to elude him, of course, is a Super Bowl ring.

Xs and Os

In the minds of Elway and the Broncos, whatever success they've achieved this season—and there's been plenty of it—will go for naught if they don't reach San Diego in late January and vie for a shot at a Super Bowl championship. The Broncos certainly have the weapons to get them there. Elway, Terrell Davis, Shannon Sharpe, three quality receivers—free-agent pickup Willie Green, Ed McCaffrey and deep threat Rod Smith—and a line bolstered by the unretirement of Gary Zimmerman gave the Broncos one of football's most dangerous offenses again this year. Denver's defense, with All-Pros Neil Smith, Bill Romanowski, Alfred Williams, Darrien Gordon, plus tough guys John Mobley, Steve Atwater and team sacks leader Maa Tanuvasa, was no slouch, either. The key to the season for the Broncos may be stopping the run, which they have had trouble doing all season.

The Bottom Line

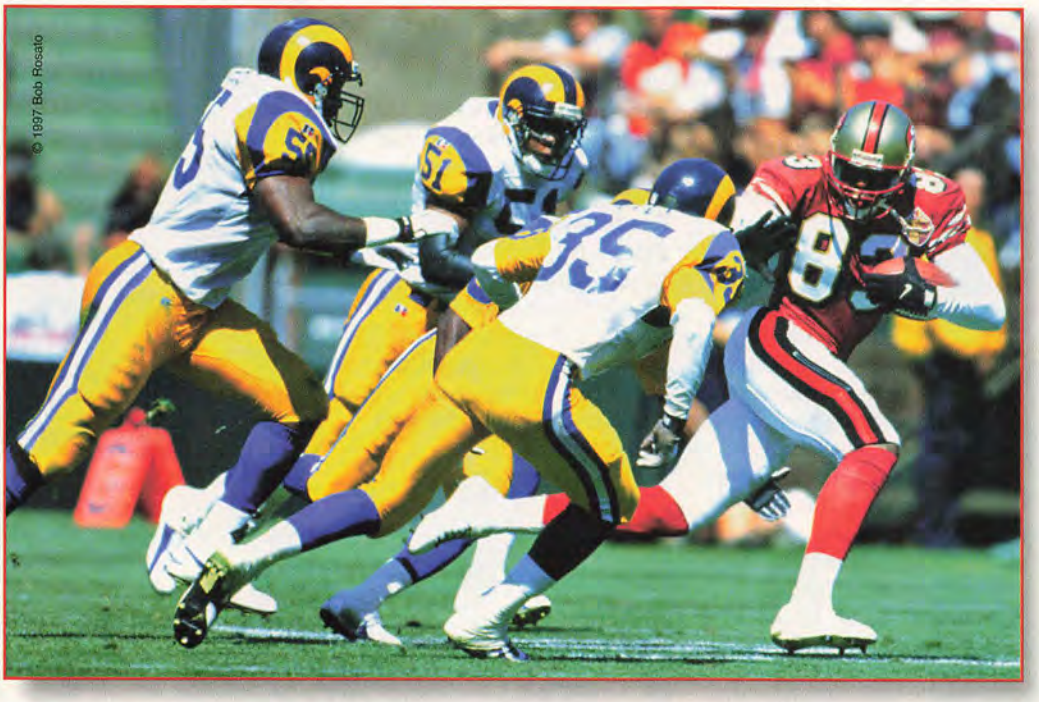
The Broncos got off to their best start ever, and there's always a concern that they might—gulp—go in the tank again this postseason. That's not likely to happen, though, because Mike Shanahan and the Broncos are playing with a purpose. They've gone to great lengths this season to keep things in perspective and not peak too early, like they did prior to last year's disastrous playoff showing against Jacksonville. With the Jaguars struggling through mounting injuries, New England appears to be the only team standing between Denver and the Super Bowl. But if the past is any indication—the Patriots haven't defeated the Broncos since 1980—Elway and Co. should begin making reservations for San Diego right now. ✖

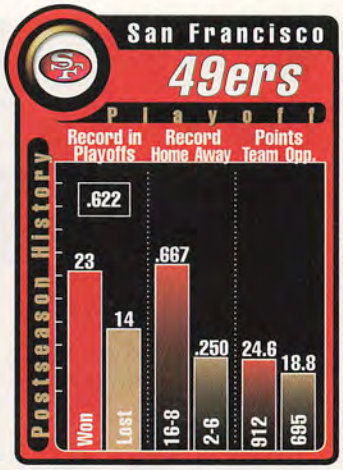


Vaughn Hebron sets up the Broncos' offense.

San Francisco 49ers

NFC WESTERN DIVISION





"I don't mind being in the hot seat. I knew that coming here." —Steve Mariucci

Forget that Jerry Rice went down in the opener with a knee injury that ruined his entire regular season. Forget that Steve Young has been beaten up more often than Michael Westbrook's teammates. Forget that rookie coach Steve Mariucci has never coached an NFL team to a playoff win. These are the 49ers. They will find a way to win.

Xs and Os

The finely-tuned sports car that used to be the 49ers' offense now runs more like a Humvee. Free-agent acquisitions Garrison Hearst and Kevin Gogan and a healthy William Floyd have the 49ers all-terraining over the rest of the NFL like the San Francisco wine-and-cheese crowd has never seen before. Terrell Owens and J.J. Stokes need to continue to elevate their games to keep the 49ers—and the bell-rung Steve Young—alive until Jerry Rice returns.

Bryant Young and Dana Stubblefield on the defensive line make the 49ers the toughest team in the NFL to run the ball on. Add sack-master Chris Doleman and a name-brand linebacking corps to the mix, and San Francisco has one of the most formidable defensive fronts in the league. The DBs aren't too shabby either. Tim McDonald, Merton Hanks and Rod Woodson have been to a combined 13 Pro Bowls, while Marquez Pope had six interceptions a year ago.

The Bottom Line

If it were anybody else, it would be a cliché to say the 49ers' playoff hopes hinge on Rice's return. There are still plenty of weapons at the disposal of Mariucci, who, under close scrutiny, has done a commendable job of holding the fabric of the 49ers together in Rice's absence. But it's the game's greatest receiver that makes the game's most prolific offense go. And while it may be true that defense wins championships, the last time we checked you still had to score to win a Super Bowl. The 49ers' newfound running game makes them stronger, but it won't be enough without Rice. If Rice is healthy by the NFC divisional playoffs, the 49ers are a legitimate title contender. If not, San Francisco will have to wait at least another year for a sixth Lombardi Trophy. ✖

Ken Norton, Jr. is pumped for the playoffs.

Pittsburgh Steelers

AFC CENTRAL DIVISION

Slash has already shown he can tuck it away and run...

The Steel City has seen its share of hard-nosed football teams. Guys like Joe Greene, Jack Lambert and even the feisty Terry Bradshaw set a workman-like standard for future Pittsburgh teams that today's Steelers apparently haven't forgotten. But with the dynamic Kordell Stewart at the controls, these Steelers have a new twist. They still have that hardhat and coveralls feel to them, only now the working man drives a Jaguar to the job site.

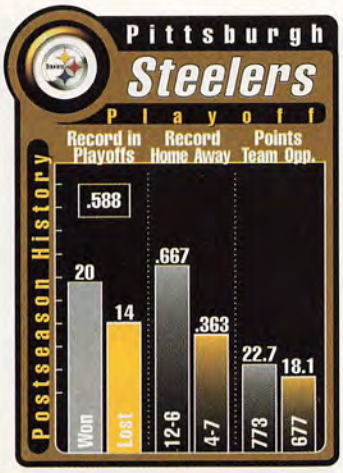
Xs and Os

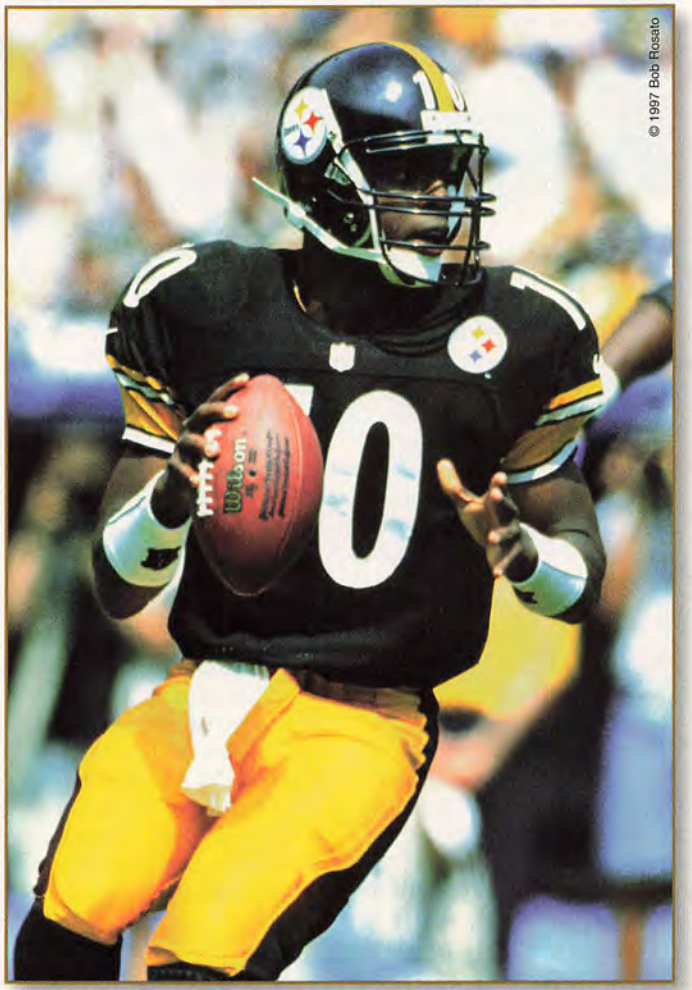
It's hard to say whether it's the system or the personnel, but this season's Steelers' zone blitz hasn't been the offensive coordinator's nightmare that it has been in years past. Like most popular trends in the NFL, the zone blitz may simply be running its course. Then again, it may be that the Steelers are finally feeling the effects of free agency, which has decimated their defensive lineup over the past several years. But with guys like Carnell Lake, Levon Kirkland and Jason Gildon still around, the Steelers need not hit the panic button just yet.

After a few early-season debacles, it seems Stewart has settled in comfortably as the Steelers' full-time quarterback. His progress has given Pittsburgh a more well-rounded offense and a big-play threat at the quarterback position like none the league has ever seen. He has also allowed the Steelers to lighten the load of Jerome Bettis, though "The Bus" is still the best means of transportation around Pittsburgh.

The Bottom Line

Stewart seems to have neatly sewed up the Steelers' biggest hole by turning in the best year by a Pittsburgh quarterback since Neil O'Donnell was back in black. The question is, can Stewart handle the pressure of the playoffs? A stout defense and power running game are the Steelers' bread and butter and will continue to serve them well in the playoffs, but Stewart is the key to Pittsburgh's postseason. Normally the weak link in recent Steelers playoff teams, the quarterback position may be one of the club's most dangerous weapons now that Stewart is the man. ✖

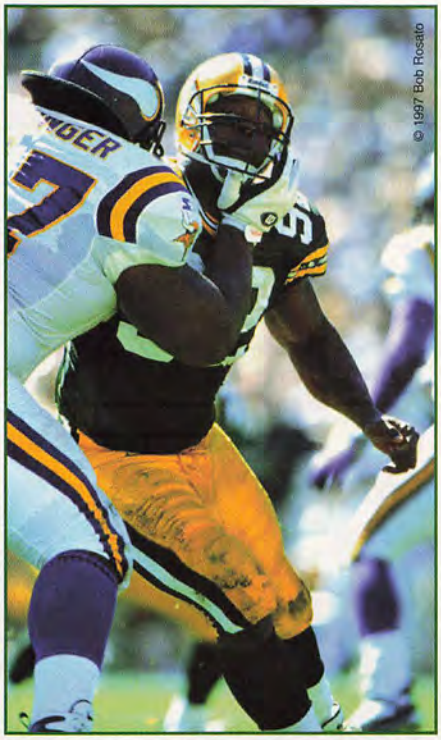




...but Stewart has come of age as a passer now that he's a full-time quarterback.

Green Bay Packers

NFC CENTRAL DIVISION



Reggie White hungers for a return to the Super Bowl.

How does a Super Bowl champion battle the complacency that inevitably sets in after the game is over, the parades are through and a new season begins? Green Bay has no idea. The Packers have been too busy this season trying to piece together a patchwork lineup from week to week just to ensure they'll still be around when it comes time to defend their title. But don't shed any tears for the Pack. Chances are, they'll be back.

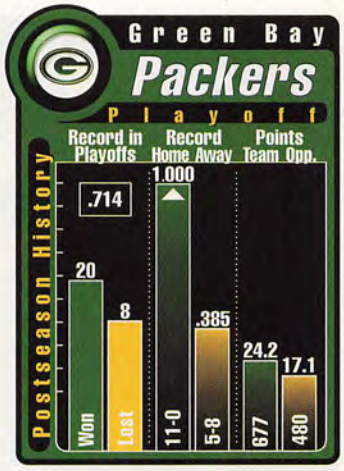
Xs and Os

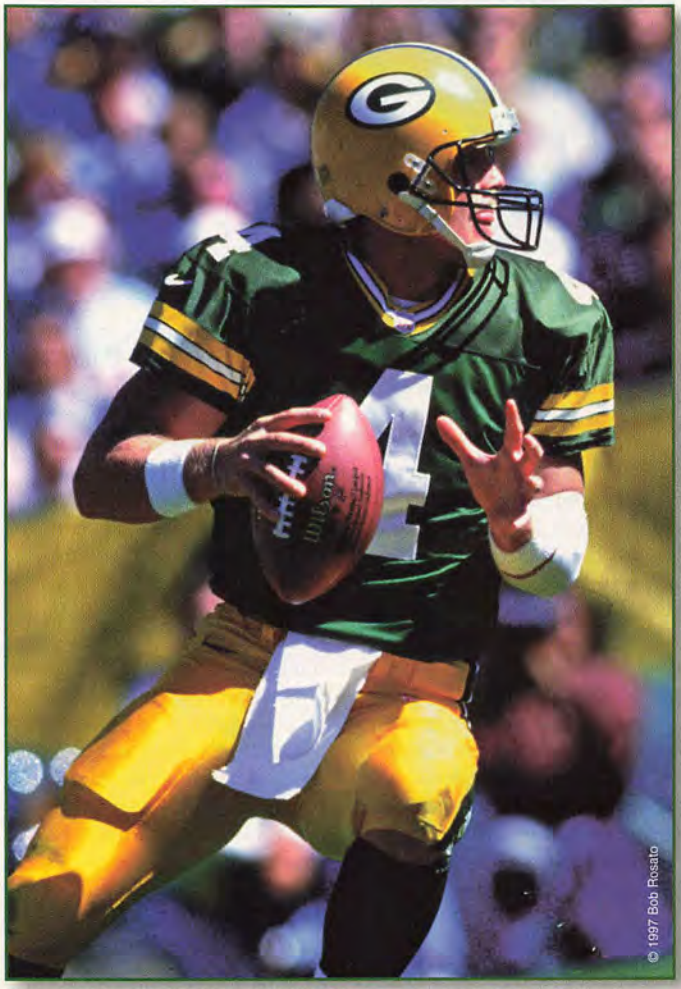
As long as Brett Favre can still lift his right arm, the Packers' offense is one to be feared. The league's two-time MVP is the ultimate playmaker, a mobile quarterback with a quick release, and a strong, accurate arm. But it's his leadership, nerves and toughness that make him the NFL's best. The overall health of the offense is the Packers' key concern, particularly on the offensive line, where injuries have limited the effectiveness of the running game and kept Favre on the run.

Reggie White, the Packers' venerable emotional leader, spearheads a Green Bay defense that is nearly identical to the one that overpowered and outwitted teams in last year's playoffs. Though Sean Jones has retired, the Packers still bring it with White, the monstrous Gilbert Brown and Santana Dotson up front. Behind them, LeRoy Butler and Eugene Robinson are the best safety tandem in the league and Doug Evans is one of the game's top all-around cornerbacks.

The Bottom Line

Conventional wisdom says the Packers will have a difficult time repeating as Super Bowl champions in 1998. In the era of free agency, winning consecutive titles seems a near impossibility, especially when you couple the Packers' free-agent losses with those to injuries and retirement. But the law of the jungle says you're the king of the mountain until somebody else knocks you off. Five teams have won back-to-back championships in the 31-year history of the Super Bowl, including one (Dallas) since free agency was instituted in the NFL. It can be done. Green Bay just might be the team to do it. ✖





Brett Favre's gutsy play has led the Packers through a challenging 1997 season.

New England Patriots

AFC EASTERN DIVISION

© 1997 Bob Rosato

Curtis Martin has the Patriots aiming for another title.

If the New England Patriots thought they weren't given the respect they deserved last year as the AFC entrant in Super Bowl XXXII, they must have flipped when folks wrote them off after coach Bill Parcells jumped ship to the division rival New York Jets. The only thing that could have made the Patriots happier than getting out from under Parcells' thumb was getting out from behind his shadow. Now they have to prove that they can get it done without their coach, and that means nothing short of a Super Bowl championship.

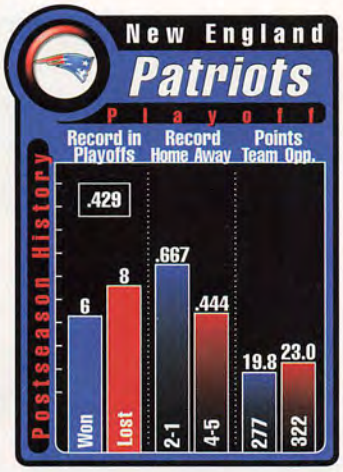
Xs and Os

The Patriots got along quite well this season, thank you, without the dictatorial Parcells. They haven't missed a beat in the win column under new coach Pete Carroll, and seem to have embraced Carroll's congenial, nurturing demeanor—especially Drew Bledsoe, whose '97 numbers are comparable to boyhood idol John Elway. Curtis Martin and Ben Coates have been their usual reliable selves, and Shawn Jefferson stepped up early in the year while Terry Glenn recovered from an injury.

What's pleased Carroll the most about this campaign, however, is the way the Pats have adapted to an aggressive, opportunistic defensive style that's more complicated than Parcells' keep-it-simple approach. Tackles Mark Wheeler and Henry Thomas, linebacker Chris Slade and defensive backs Ty Law and Willie Clay are enjoying productive seasons. The Patriots' overall defense has been ranked among the league's top 10 all year, and their pass defense is much improved over 1996.

The Bottom Line

If the Patriots make it back to the Super Bowl, they'll probably have to dispose of a tough wild-card foe, then beat Denver at Mile High to do it. Facing the Broncos would be an unenviable task, to be sure, considering that they whipped New England in Week 6 and have revenge on their minds following last year's stunning playoff loss to Jacksonville. It'll be interesting to see if the Pats respond to Carroll's non-confrontational style during crunch time, or if they'll miss Parcells' intensity. ✖



© 1997 Bob Rosato

Chris Slade and the Patriots' defense have adjusted to new coach Pete Carroll's style.

New York Giants

NFC EASTERN DIVISION

Rookie Tiki Barber beefs up the Giants' running game.

When was it? Was it when the New York Giants dumped the five-time defending division champion Dallas Cowboys in Week 6? Maybe it was a week later when Danny Kanell made the first start of his career, leading the Giants past Arizona? Perhaps it came in Week 8, when Kanell's overtime heroics left the Giants in sole possession of first place in the NFC East? Whenever the defining moment came in the Giants' surprising season, it's been a long time coming as far as New York fans are concerned. They have a winner once again.

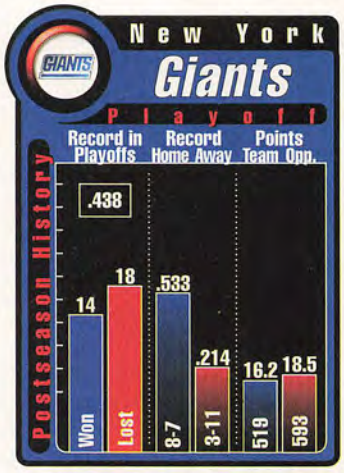
Xs and Os

No one knows for sure what first-year head coach Jim Fassel is really thinking about his team's brewing quarterback controversy. But while his mouth says "we'll wait and see," his heart must be singing "you 'da man, kid" as he hands the reigns over to Kanell. The beleaguered Dave Brown's mistake-prone play more than justified a switch before an injury to Brown gave Kanell his shot.

Ultimately, it will be the running game and the defense, not the quarterback, that decide just how far the Giants can go. Fullback Charles Way has emerged as an unlikely feature back and the rest of the offense has played intelligently, keeping turnovers and sacks to a minimum. On the flip side, a defense led by a ball-hawking secondary has sealed up New York opponents and kept a deliberate Giants' offense from having to win any shootouts.

The Bottom Line

It will be interesting to see if Kanell can hold his own down the stretch and if the Giants will finally admit they made a mistake with Brown. Kanell hasn't bit off more than he can chew in a game yet, which is key for the quarterback in the Giants' offense, and particularly important for Kanell, whose confidence is still quite impressionable in his young career. The Giants probably won't be taken seriously by anyone until they win a few playoff games—which is precisely why they could. An overlooked team is always a dangerous one, but a team that controls the ball and the clock like the Giants could be a positively devastating one. ✖



Dave Brown has had his problems in New York, but says all he cares about is winning.

Jacksonville Jaguars

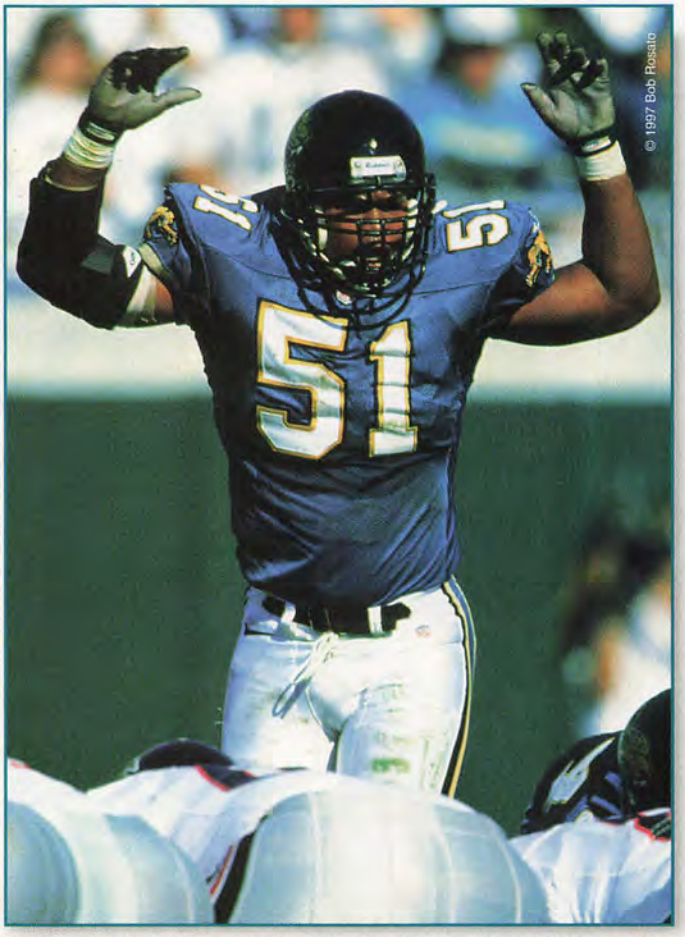
AFC CENTRAL DIVISION

The Jaguars surprised everyone this season, perhaps even themselves, by not falling to pieces when Mark Brunell went down with a knee injury in the preseason and winning their first two games with two different backup quarterbacks. It's foolish to say the Jaguars don't need their brilliant, All-Pro quarterback, but in his absence the Jaguars proved they're not just a one-man show. Now, after a 1996 dream season that saw them march all the way to the AFC title game, they also have to prove their no one-hit wonders.

Xs and Os

Jimmy Smith—who has emerged as one of the league's elite receivers—Keenan McCardell and James Stewart give Brunell plenty of targets, though the Jaguars haven't needed them as often as in the past. That's because Stewart and Natrone Means are getting room to run from a road-grader offensive line, led by tackles Tony Boselli and Leon Searcy, which offers a power running game that is an effective changeup from Brunell's run-and-gun style. Jacksonville is talented but undersized along the defensive front and is vulnerable against a bruising running game. Still, the Jaguars have plenty of speed and depth, which allows them to rotate fresh legs into the lineup. Tony Brackens, Kevin Hardy and Renaldo Wynn are the future of the Jaguars' defense, but veterans like Jeff Lageman, Eddie Robinson and Clyde Simmons have been invaluable in helping a mixed bag of players jell quickly.

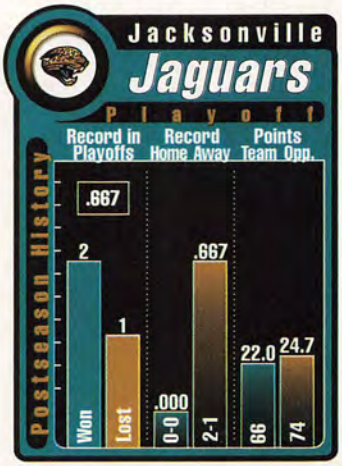
The Jaguars need Natrone Means healthy if they hope to make another playoff run.



Kevin Hardy has raised his game even higher from his sensational rookie campaign.

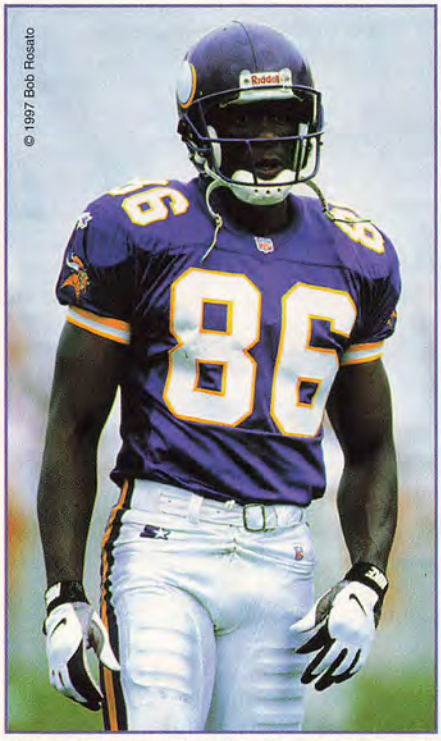
The Bottom Line

In something of a role reversal, Jacksonville's defense has kept the team in games that the offense couldn't break open. That's quite a switch from a year ago, when the offense was counted on to pull the defense's fat out of the fire by winning shootouts. The Jaguars must spread the ball around to get the most production out of their offense and keep an easily-worn defense off the field. To duplicate last season's playoff run they need to be healthy—injuries to Means and Boselli are key—and must hang their hat on the offense, not the defense, which is improved but alone won't take them to the Super Bowl. ✖



Minnesota Vikings

NFC CENTRAL DIVISION



Jake Reed: One half of the NFL's best 1-2 receiving punch.

During a season in which the focus in their division rests squarely on Tampa Bay's rise and Green Bay's struggles, the Minnesota Vikings could simply fade into the background, but they refuse to do so. Though much of the noise being made in Minnesota the Vikings would gladly silence, if they could, they have also made the league stand up and take notice with their play on the field, which has the team poised for a possible division crown and its fifth playoffs appearance in six years.

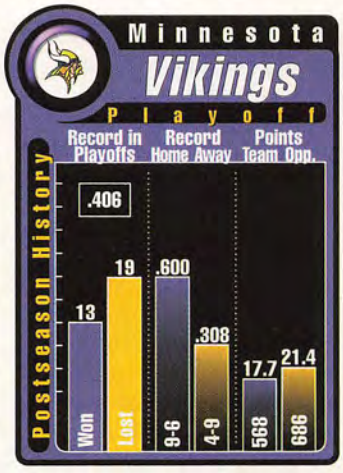
Xs and Os

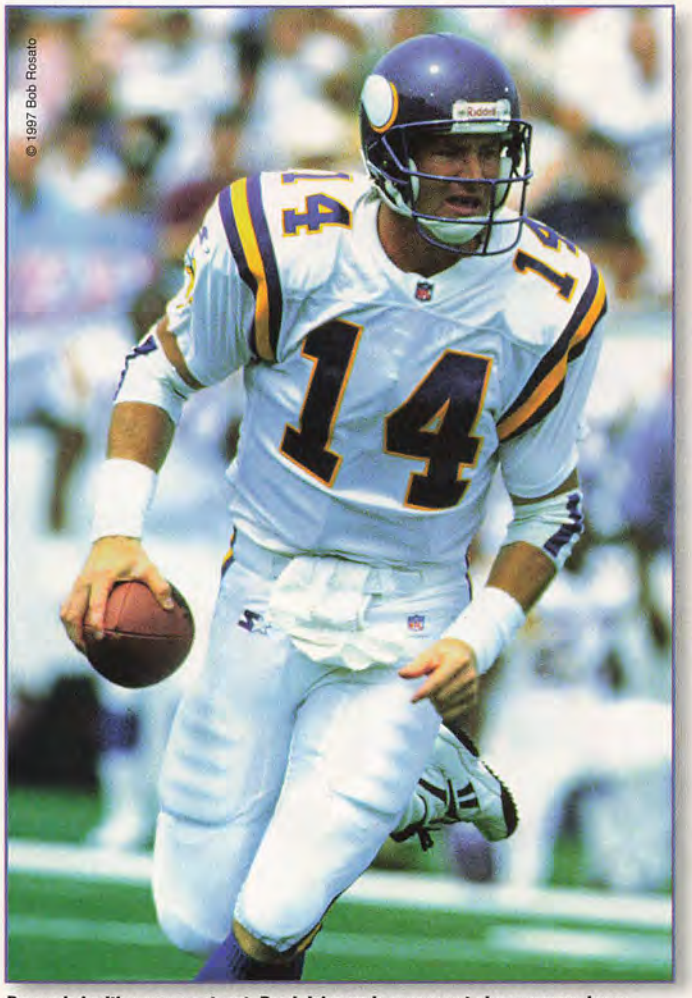
After waiting years for a talent-laden offensive lineup to start producing like one, the Vikings' patience has finally been rewarded. Minnesota has a healthy Robert Smith, the progress of Brad Johnson and its usual crop of standouts to thank for that. Cris Carter and Jake Reed, the best 1-2 receiving punch in the NFL, and a crafty offensive line are having typically stellar seasons. But it's Smith, who is finally enjoying a relatively injury-free year, and Johnson who have allowed the Vikings to take the next step.

The demise of the Vikings' defense, foretold by the departure of several key contributors and coordinator Tony Dungy, now the head coach in Tampa Bay, has never happened. The line, led by the relentless John Randle, is still a near-unstoppable force. Ends Derrick Alexander and Fernando Smith reap the benefits of Randle's constant double-teamings, while the Vikings' quick, mobile linebackers are among the league's best at stuffing the run.

The Bottom Line

What happens in the ongoing feud between head coach Dennis Green and Minnesota management may be as vital to the Vikings' fortunes as anything that happens on the field. Green has accused the Vikings of not allowing him to become a majority owner of the team and even threatened a lawsuit in his recently released book. The situation is curious because of its timing and motivation—two of Green's supposed strengths. The controversy will test the players' confidence in Green's commitment to the team. ✖





Rewarded with a new contract, Brad Johnson has proven to be a money player.

Kansas City Chiefs

AFC WESTERN DIVISION

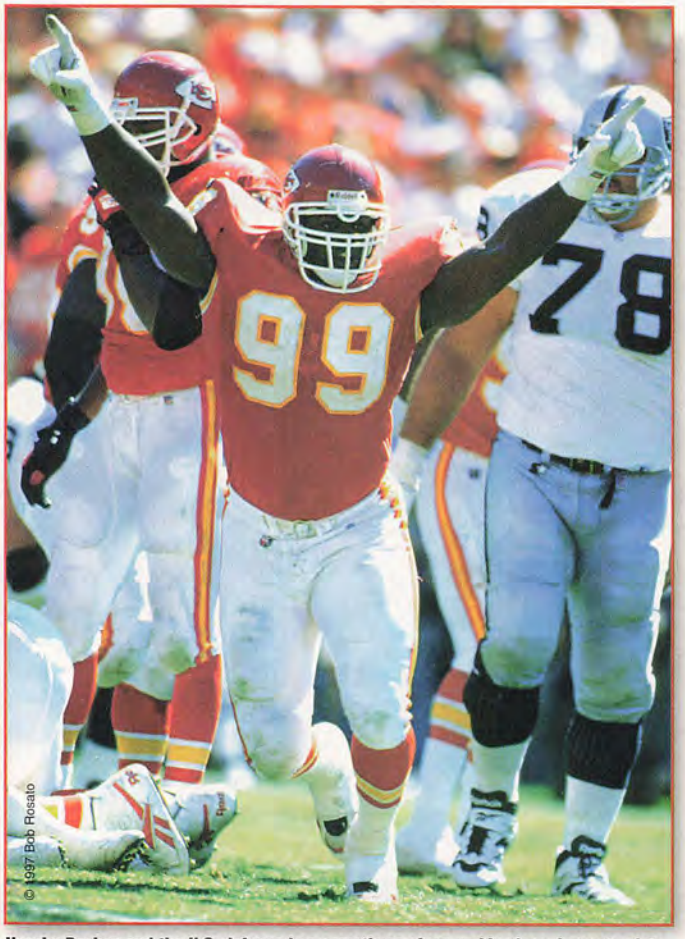
It wasn't supposed to happen like this. After having the longest streak of consecutive postseason appearances broken amid a disappointing second-half performance last year, the Chiefs made the decision to cut loose some of the team's high-profile veterans in favor of youth, speed and athleticism. With 11 new starters at key positions and a grueling schedule that features contests against seven different playoff teams, the general belief among league insiders was that the Chiefs would have to wait until next year to think about the playoffs. But behind a stingy defense and a newly resurgent offense, the Chiefs have surprised critics and opposing teams alike.

Xs and Os

Despite a strong rebound after being held without a touchdown in an opening day loss to division rival Denver, the Chiefs remain questionable at many key positions. With a running game by committee—Greg Hill and Marcus Allen split most of the touches—Kansas City has lost some of its power running reputation that vaulted them to rushing leaders just two years ago. What the Chiefs lack in rushing performance, however, they make up for in a strong and consistent passing threat that highlights new quarterback Elvis Grbac and receiver Andre Rison, as well as more effective use of new tight ends Ted Popson and rookie Tony Gonzalez.

The Chiefs' defense, employing a variation on the zone blitz that spotlights linebacker Derrick Thomas as the "Falcon," has given up big plays (though few points) all year. The starting safety tandem of second-year players Jerome Woods and Reggie Tongue, as well as new starting linebacker Donnie Edwards—who is on track to break the Chiefs' team record for tackles in a season—have contributed significantly.

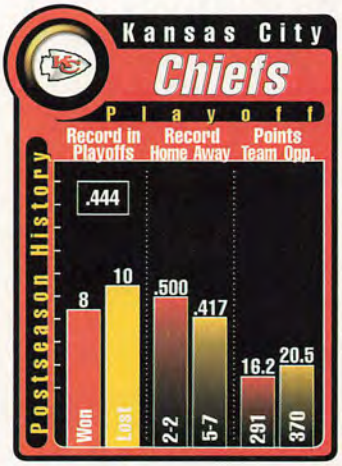
A revamped Chiefs offense has led to more scenes like this at Arrowhead Stadium.



Vaughn Booker and the K.C. defense has sometimes given up big plays, but not points.

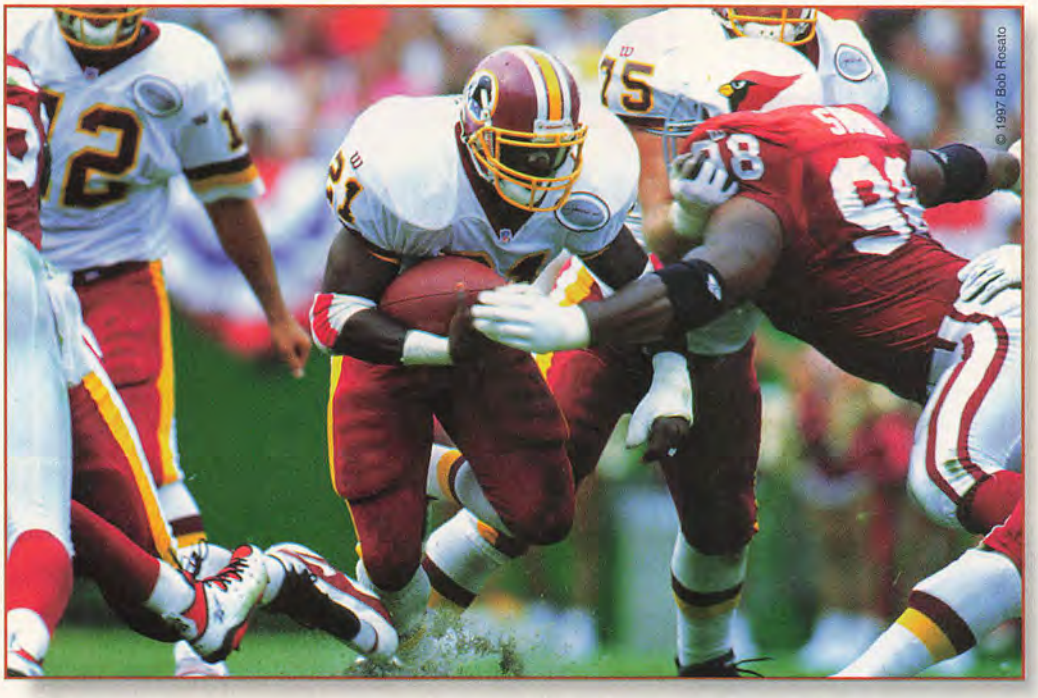
The Bottom Line

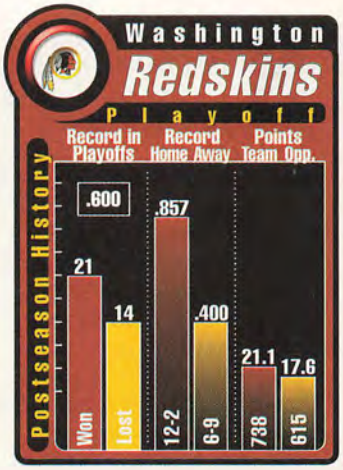
If Grbac can recover from a broken collar bone, the Chiefs have an aggressive offense capable of putting big points on the board and have their best opportunity in recent memory to go deep into the postseason. If the defense can keep opponents' big-plays to a minimum, this year of rebuilding may become one of celebration. ✖



Washington Redskins

NFC EASTERN DIVISION





Has there been any other franchise in the National Football League that has gone through more change in recent years than the Washington Redskins? From the passing of the ownership torch from Jack Kent Cooke to his son, John, to the changing of the guard on the field, where the starting quarterback position was stripped from Heath Shuler and handed to that staunch overachiever, Gus Frerotte, the Redskins have come full circle. Now with a shiny, new stadium and a fresh attitude, the Redskins are entering a new era of excellence.

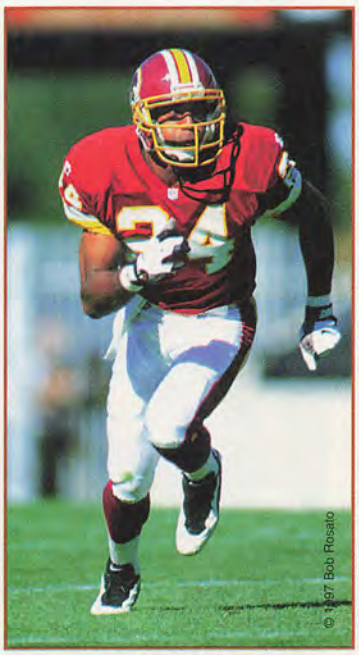
Xs and Os

There are two versions of the Redskins offense: The one with Terry Allen and the bad one. Through Week 10, Washington was 5-1 with Allen in the lineup. On those occasions that injuries have sidelined the Pro Bowl running back, the Redskins have gone 0-3. Washington is a different team without Allen's production—he rushed for a Redskin-record 1,353 yards and NFL-high 21 TDs in '96—and presence. The only running back in NFL history known to have returned from ACL injuries to both knees, Allen is a respected leader and the emotional core of this team. The signing of Cris Dishman improved the defensive secondary by light years. Teams are now forced to choose between throwing in the direction of the former Pro Bowl cornerback or future Hall of Famer Darrell Green. Good luck. Unfortunately, nagging injuries to key defensive players like Ken Harvey and Chris Mims and the petulance of holdout tackle Sean Gilbert will keep the undermanned Redskins' defense searching for ways to stop people.

The Bottom Line

The game plan in Washington will stay simple: run the ball hard, avoid turnovers and don't give up the big play on defense. The Redskins can overpower most teams at the line of scrimmage, but when the running game isn't clicking and Frerotte, who is still developing as an NFL starter, is asked to do too much, the offense goes south. The health of Allen and a defense that can't afford any losses to injury will determine whether or not the Redskins will contend. ✖

"Terry Allen's the guy who carries this offense on his shoulders."
—Shar Pourdanesh



Safety Stanley Richard stays on his toes.

New York Jets

AFC EASTERN DIVISION

So far, the only thing that has been able to top the hype leading up to Bill Parcells' first season as head coach of the New York Jets has been the season itself. It is Parcells' single-minded drive and unwavering confidence in his system that have allowed a diversive team that won just one game last season to pull together this season and, by Week 10, move into sole possession of first place in the AFC East for the first time in 11 years and take aim at their first playoffs appearance since 1991.

Xs and Os

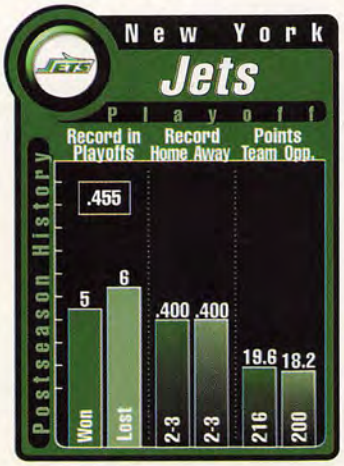
Parcells made a statement when he benched an ineffective Neil O'Donnell in favor of the untested Glen Foley in, of all games, the Jets' Week 8 contest in New England, otherwise known as Tuna Bowl II. Foley made the most of his chance by leading New York on three second-half scoring drives to knock off the Patriots—just one example of how the Jets have responded all year to Parcells' demanding style. Though the quarterback situation is uncertain, New York has won with both O'Donnell and Foley, and the team has a deep corps of receivers—Wayne Chrebet, Jeff Graham and Keyshawn Johnson may be the best trio in the league—to make things easier on whoever might be doing the passing. A sound running game, led by the tireless Adrian Murrell, and an opportunistic defense will also buy the Jets some time while Parcells works out the kinks in the passing game.

The Jets ' "Gang Green" defense has been solid, but needs a stronger pass rush.

Neil O'Donnell's up-and-down season will be worth it if the Jets make the playoffs.

The Bottom Line

Though Parcells has put them on the fast track to respectability, the Jets are still very much a work in progress. In addition to the inconsistencies on offense, the defense has played out of character for a Parcells unit. The pass rush has been almost nonexistent, save for occasional bursts from linebacker Mo Lewis. Lucky for the Jets, the secondary is solid, with Aaron Glenn and Ray Mickens looking like one of the premier cornerback duos of the future. But until the Jets start getting some pressure on the quarterback and take some of the pressures off their own QB, Parcells will only be back in the Super Bowl if he buys a ticket like the rest of us. ✖



Tampa Bay Buccaneers

NFC CENTRAL DIVISION

If there's one thing this NFL season has revealed, it's that once again you can only count on death and taxes. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers are losers no more. There was a time you could pencil the Bucs in for 10 losses in the preseason without a second thought. But the hiring of head coach Tony Dungy before the start of the '96 season, the promise of a new stadium and a roster brimming with some of the league's most brilliant, young talent has quickly reformed a misguided, underachieving club into a model NFL franchise.

Xs and Os

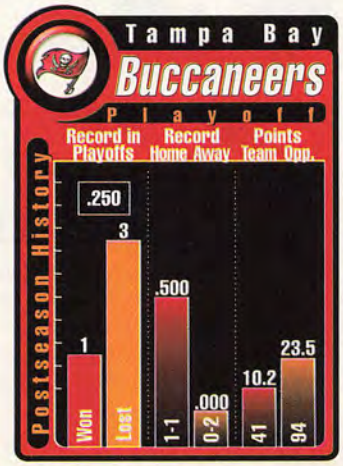
After a scintillating 5-0 start, the Bucs burned out, losing their next three contests. What went wrong? First of all, no one could have expected Trent Dilfer, the Lazarus of NFL quarterbacks, to keep up his torrid early-season pace. But unfortunately for Tampa, both their hammer-head running game and big-play defense have fallen off as well. Bruising Mike Alstott and silky-smooth rookie Warrick Dunn got off to a fantastic start, but haven't found as many open holes down the stretch. The defense has kept the Buccaneers in nearly every game this season, but has recently looked vulnerable. Tampa Bay gave up runs of 82 and 80 yards to Barry Sanders in Week 7 and allowed an average of 330 total yards during the three-game losing streak. Defensive leaders such as Hardy Nickerson, Warren Sapp and Derrick Brooks will have to find a way to motivate their teammates to rise to the occasion.

Warren Sapp has helped elevate the Bucs' defense to among the best in football.

Rookie sensation Warrick Dunn has been a hard target for NFL defenders all season.

The Bottom Line

The simple truth is, the Buccaneers' best days are ahead. Though they have served notice to the rest of the league that they have arrived, Tampa Bay's growing pains aren't over by a long shot. There are always speed bumps along the way for a young team still marveling at life on the other side of .500. But you never know what could happen if Dilfer catches fire again, the running game finds a rhythm and the defense seals up. And even if the Bucs don't find themselves suiting up in late January '98, there should be Super Bowls in the not-so-distant future that will be theirs for the taking. ✖



AFC Roundup

Miami Dolphins

What is this? Dan Marino looking mortal? Jimmy Johnson sipping cold beers on his boat in January? J.J. hasn't gotten the running game going in Miami and, for once, Marino couldn't bail out the 'Fins.

Baltimore Ravens

It was the same, old story for the Ravens in '97: The offense lights up the scoreboard, but not as much as opponents light up the defense. Until the Ravens can stop the big play, the postseason will go on without them.

Oakland Raiders

Call them Baltimore West. Bringing in Jeff George and unleashing Napoleon Kaufman made for lots of offensive fireworks in Oakland, but few wins. The Raiders' defense must have heard Al Davis wrong: "Just wilt, baby."

Buffalo Bills

Formerly a playoff institution, the Bills have taken a fall. While the star-studded defense gives opposing offenses nightmares, the team's once-explosive offense has become too conservative and predictable to scare anyone.

San Diego Chargers

The Chargers are an absolute enigma. They have several playmakers at key positions, such as LB Junior Seau and WR Tony Martin, and they can beat anyone on any given day. Any day, that is, except Sunday.

Cincinnati Bengals

Wasn't this supposed to be the year the Bengals made their comeback? A pushover offensive line that couldn't even fake a running game and a failed version of Dick LeBeau's zone blitz are to thank for another dismal season.

Seattle Seahawks

Early on, the Seahawks appeared to be on their way to another hapless, hopeless season. But with QB Warren Moon, pro football's most prolific passer, and a revamped defense, Seattle has the look of a future contender.

Indianapolis Colts

Just when it looked like Indianapolis was ready to contend for a Super Bowl, the players woke up and realized they were actually the Colts. The root of the problem is on the offensive line, which has kept Jim Harbaugh running scared.

Tennessee Oilers

The Oilers made strides on offense this season, as QB Steve McNair found more consistency and confidence in his third NFL season. But inevitably, a porous defense and lack of a true home-field advantage stopped this team before it started.

NFC Roundup

Arizona Cardinals

Once again, there weren't many wins in the Cards this season. The defense is solid, but the offense has no identity and is woefully inconsistent. Still, a TD here, a field goal there and Arizona finishes with a winning record.

Atlanta Falcons

The Falcons finally made a smart move and trashed everything they'd done this decade to start over. Bringing in Dan Reeves and losing the run-and-shoot offense didn't bring immediate results, but it will down the road.

Carolina Panthers

Dubbed the dynasty of the future, the Panthers took a step back this season. Plagued by injury and controversy, QB Kerry Collins quickly fell from grace while the defense wallowed early and dropped out of NFC West contention.

Chicago Bears

One of the oldest and proudest franchises in the NFL played like an expansion club in '97. Even if the offense comes around and the defense stops *anyone* before season's end, Dave Wannstedt might still find himself out of a job.

Dallas Cowboys

How the mighty have fallen. After making the playoffs each of the past six seasons and winning three Super Bowls in the '90s, the Cowboys are dragging. Their age and all those extra playoff games are beginning to show.

Detroit Lions

When will the football gods finally smile on Barry Sanders? The Lions don't deserve their unassuming megaback, and Sanders certainly doesn't deserve the clueless Lions, who actually long for the days of Wayne Fontes.

New Orleans Saints

Mike Ditka thought he was taking over the Saints job to teach a perennial underachiever how to win, not to clean up a train wreck. Don't be surprised to see 'Da Coach soliciting 'Aints fans for one of those nifty paper bag hats soon.

Philadelphia Eagles

If the Eagles could buy themselves a contender, they'd be the 49ers. But they're not. Despite bringing in a number of big-name free agents in recent years, the Eagles haven't gotten much of a return on their investments.

St. Louis Rams

Dick Vermeil gave up a comfy seat in the press box for this? Returning to the coaching ranks after a 15-year absence to become head man in St. Louis, Vermeil might just be driven out of coaching by these Rams for good.

More than a Game

The 10 greatest showdowns in playoffs history

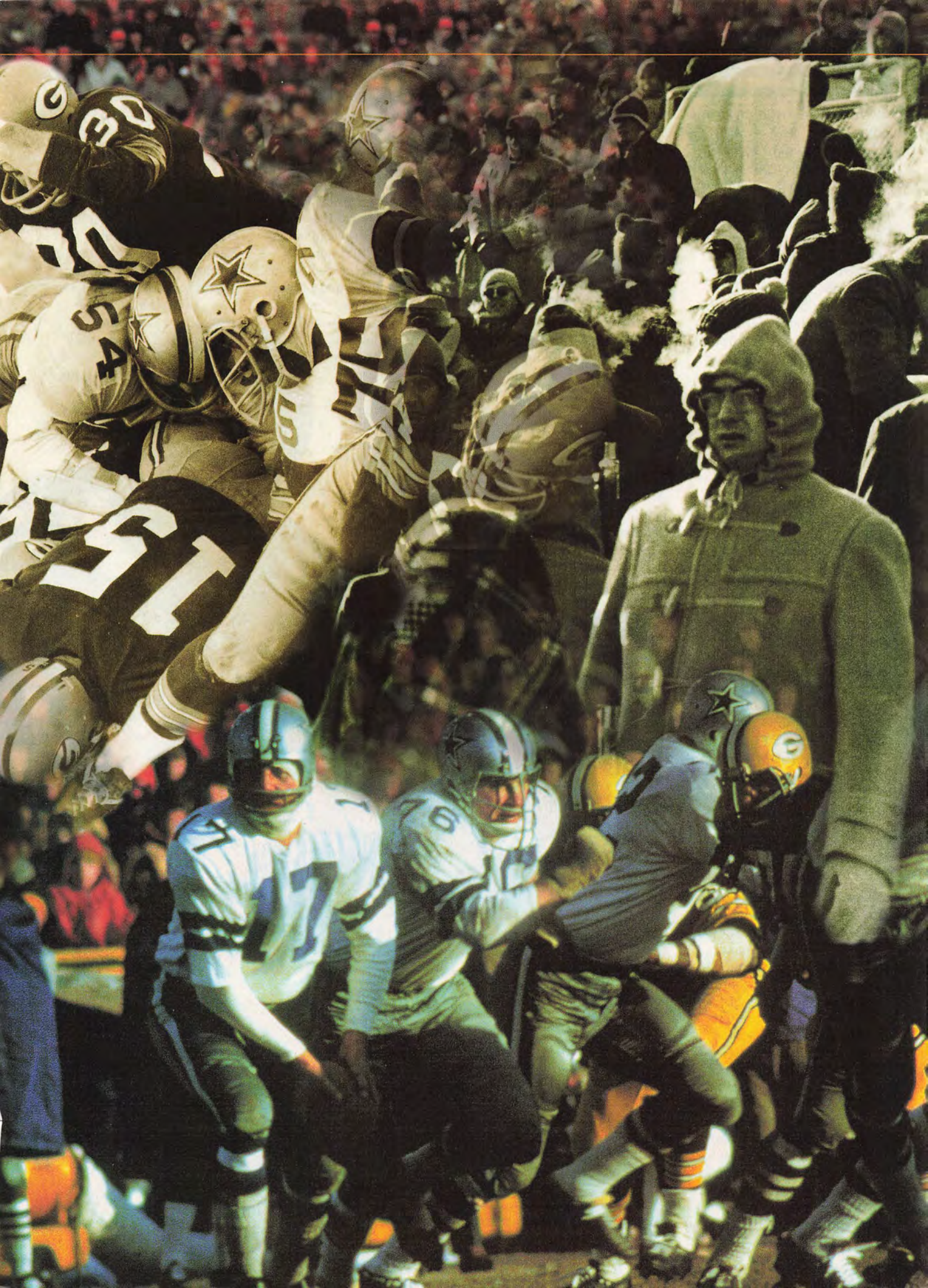
Photos © Vernon Biever

By Steve Silverman

They are the moments that define a sport. For those that love the game, an intrasquad scrimmage on a hot day in July can be tremendous entertainment. But the best moments come in the postseason, when it's always kill or be killed for both teams.

A freezing December day in Green Bay, a sweltering Miami afternoon or a Christmas treat in Kansas City. One can argue that any of these scenarios contributed to the best games ever played, and they've also had all the passion and drama needed to remain etched in the public memory forever.

The greatest games are the ones where peak efforts are provided by both teams and the fans get an opportunity to see what's inside of players. The following list of games are battles where everything was left on the field, often under extraordinary conditions.



1 1967 NFL Championship Game: Green Bay 21, Dallas 17

It was an awful day—one that was so cold, Frank Gifford's coffee froze when the broadcaster put it down for two minutes. At minus-13 degrees, this game became known as "The Ice Bowl," a title earned by the players, coaches and the 50,861 fans in attendance at Lambeau Field.

Despite the awful weather, the two best teams in football co-wrote the finest drama the game has ever known. Like a great Shakespearean play, this production had three acts. In the first, the Packers seized control, racing to a two-touchdown lead as quarterback Bart Starr hit wideout Boyd Dowler with scoring passes in the first and second quarters. The Cowboys, in danger of being obliterated and humiliated, rose up and forced the issue in the second act. Defensive end George Andrie recovered a Starr fumble and rumbled seven yards into the end zone to get Dallas on the scoreboard. A field goal by Danny Villanueva brought the Cowboys within four, and then running back Dan Reeves threw a 50-yard TD pass on an option to Lance Rentzel, giving the Cowboys a 17-14 lead.

"It was a great play," said Reeves. "They had no idea we would try something like that under those conditions. I saw that Lance was open, and I just was hoping the ball would get there."

It did, and the Packers were forced to respond under the worst of conditions. In Act Three, Starr drove the Packers relentlessly, finding the soft underbelly of the Dallas defense. As the contest ticked toward its conclusion, the weather conditions grew even more unbearable. On fourth-and-goal from the one, coach Vince Lombardi rejected a field goal that would have sent the game into overtime. Instead, Starr followed a block by guard Jerry Kramer over Cowboy defensive lineman Jethro Pugh and plowed his way into the end zone for the victory. Two weeks later, the Packers won Super Bowl II over the Raiders, but the victory in the Ice Bowl was undoubtedly Lombardi's finest moment.

2 1981 AFC divisional playoffs: San Diego 41, Miami 38 (OT)

With its high octane offense, the Chargers rang up 478 points during the regular season, with 33 touchdown passes by Dan Fouts and 19 scores by running back Chuck Muncie, en route to becoming the AFC West champions.

The Dolphins won the AFC East with a less powerful offense, but a better defense. The Orange Bowl was normally a great home field advantage for the Dolphins, but the Chargers came out with no fear. By the time the first quarter was over, San Diego had a 24-0 lead.

After getting hit with that bolo punch, Dolphins quarterback Don Strock woke up his team's sleeping offense with a precision performance. On the last play of the half, Strock hit wideout Duriel Harris on a comeback pattern—known to every schoolyard player as a buttonhook. Harris then lateralled the ball to running back Tony Nathan, who was in full stride. Nathan charged down the sidelines from 25 yards out, and the Dolphins had closed the gap to 24-17.

The Dolphins maintained their momentum through the third quarter and when Nathan scored on a 12-yard run early in the fourth, the Dolphins had a 38-31 lead. The Chargers, seemingly out of gas, managed a late drive that culminated with Fouts hitting running back James Brooks with a nine-yard TD pass, making overtime a likely scenario. Miami's Uwe von Schamann attempted a 43-yard field goal on the last play of regulation, but the Chargers blocked it. They did the same on von

Pittsburgh held off a late Dallas surge to capture victory in Super Bowl X.

Schamann's 25-yarder at 11:27 of overtime, as tight end Kellen Winslow got a hand on the kick. Winslow, who caught 13 passes for 166 yards and a touchdown, was heroic in the overtime with his acrobatic catches, allowing Rolf Benirschke to kick a 29-yard field goal with 13:52 left to propel the Chargers into the AFC Championship Game.

"I have never been so tired in my life as I was at the end of that game," recalls Winslow. "I left my soul out on the field that day, and so did everyone else. It was a defining moment for our team."

3 1958 NFL Championship Game: Baltimore 28, N.Y. Giants 17 (OT)

This is the game that is largely credited with thrusting the NFL into the forefront of professional sports. As television started to become a staple in most American households, the NFL married its future to the new media. Many watching this game in their living rooms quickly became addicted to professional football because of what they saw unfold at Yankee Stadium.

The Giants, with quarterback Charlie Conerly leading the way, took a fourth-quarter lead when running back Frank Gifford caught a 15-yard TD pass. The Giants' defense was doing a brilliant job of frustrating quarterback Johnny Unitas, who had failed to lead the Colts on a scoring drive since the second quarter. But Unitas led the Colts on a last-minute march into Giants territory that stalled with seven seconds and Baltimore on the New York 1-yard line. Shaky Steve Myhra connected on a 7-yard field goal—the goal posts were still positioned on the goal line—and the NFL had its first sudden death overtime game.

In overtime, Unitas drove the Colts over, under and through the Giants' defense, which was led by Hall of Fame linebacker Sam Huff. On the 13th play of the drive, fullback Alan Ameche dove into the end zone through a huge hole off right tackle and the Colts had a 23-17 victory.

"When I slapped the ball into Al's belly and saw him take off, I knew nobody was going to stop him within one yard," said Unitas. "They couldn't have stopped him if he needed 10 yards."

4 1971 AFC playoffs: Miami 27, Kansas City 24 (2 OTs)

The Dolphins would eventually lose the Super Bowl to Dallas, but it was this epic Christmas Day struggle that would define their greatness. It became the longest game in NFL history, ending when Garo Yepremian booted a 37-yard field goal with 7:20 to go in the second overtime.

ALL HAIL SUPER SUNDAY

For those of you who've been cryogenically frozen since 1967 (the Lambeau Field winds are known to have that effect), there have been a few changes in the NFL over the past 30 years. The Cleveland Browns have become the Ravens and now play in Baltimore; the Colts are still the Colts, but now they play in Indianapolis; and the Vikings still play in Minnesota, but only indoors. And oh yeah, that obscure little NFL-AFL World Championship Game is now called the Super Bowl, and it has become the single biggest event in the universe since the Big Bang. The following is a quick look at how the big game has changed over the years. By the way, be careful what you eat—those wedges of cheese have become hats.

NFL-AFL World Championship Game vs. Super Bowl XXXI

January 15, 1967	January 26, 1997
The Venue	
L.A.'s Memorial Coliseum	New Orleans' Super Dome
Ticket Prices	
$12, $10, $6	$275
Ticket Availability	
31,000 seats still available	What, are you kidding?
Attendance	
61,946	72,301
T.V. Rating/Total Number of Viewers	
40.8/41 million	43.3/128.9 million
Network Broadcasting Game	
CBS and NBC	Fox
Cost of Commercial Air Time	
$85,000 per 60 seconds	$1,200,000 per 30 seconds
National Anthem Performer	
U. of Arizona Marching Band	Luther Vandross
Half Time Show Performers	
U. of Arizona Marching Band	James Brown/House of Blues
Press Credentials Issued	
338	4,000
Winners/Losers Share (Per Player)	
$15,000/$7,500	$48,000/$29,000
Age of Winning Quarterback	
33 (Bart Starr)	27 (Brett Favre)
Final Score	
NFL def. AFL 35-10	NFC def. AFC 35-27
Winning Team	
Green Bay Packers	Green Bay Packers

The Chiefs had taken a 24-17 lead midway through the fourth quarter when running back Ed Podolak scored on a 3-yard run to culminate a six-play, 91-yard drive. Podolak had an amazing day, accumulating 350 all-purpose yards. The Dolphins tied it when quarterback Bob Griese hit tight end Marv Fleming with a 5-yard TD pass with just 1:36 remaining. On the ensuing kickoff, Podolak rambled 78 yards to the Dolphin 22 to set up an easy game-winning field-goal attempt for All-Pro Jan Stenerud. Inexplicably, Stenerud pushed the 32-yard attempt wide and then had another attempt blocked in overtime by Dolphins middle linebacker Nick Buoniconti. It appeared the game would never end, but then Dolphins fullback Larry Csonka took the game over in the second overtime. A punishing 29-yard run gave the Dolphins great scoring position inside the Chiefs 40, and Yepremian eventually won it.

"That game told me all I needed to know about this team," says legendary Dolphins coach Don Shula. "There was an inner fire, a refusal to accept defeat. I think the Chiefs realized this as well, and we found out quite a bit about ourselves on that day."

5 1981 NFC Championship Game: San Francisco 28, Dallas 27

The 49ers would eventually become the most impressive dynasty in NFL history, but on this day they were fighting to get to their first Super Bowl. The Cowboys had beaten the Niners in two heartbreaking NFC title games during the 1970s, and coach Bill Walsh was desperate to break the Dallas jinx.

Dallas had a 17-14 lead at halftime, as running back Tony Dorsett and quarterback Danny White gave the Cowboy offense good balance. In the third quarter, the 49ers' defense dominated and an interception by defensive back Bobby Leopold set up a 2-yard TD run by fullback Johnny Davis. The Cowboys responded with 10 fourth-quarter points as White connected with tight end Doug Cosbie on a 21-yard TD pass to give the Cowboys a 27-21 lead.

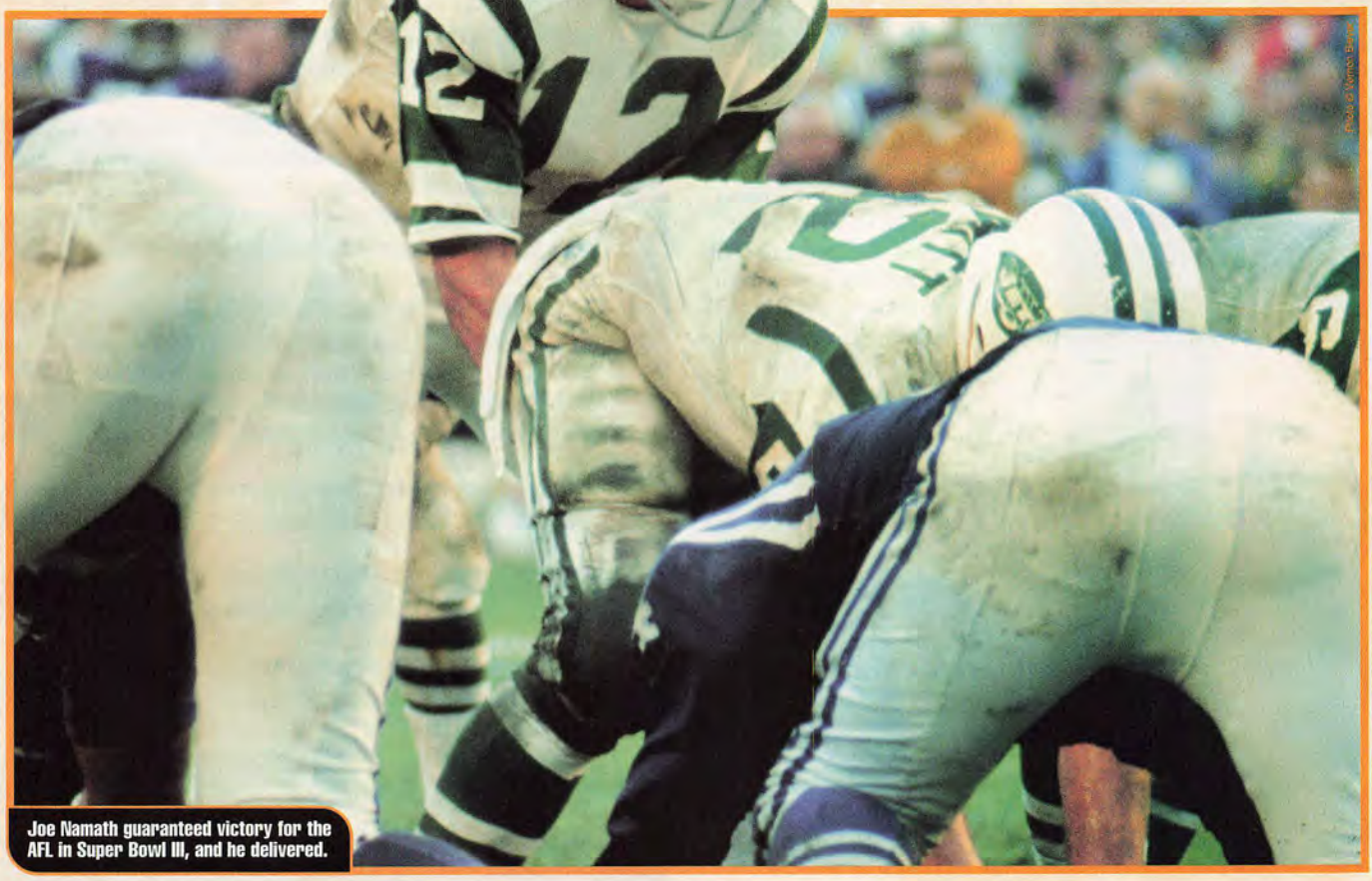
With just under five minutes remaining, Joe Montana moved his team downfield with pinpoint passes, primarily to wide-outs Dwight Clark and Freddie Solomon. The Niners reached the Cowboys 6-yard line, and on third down, Montana rolled to his right, eluding advancing Dallas defensive end Larry Bethea. Montana fired the ball into the corner of the end zone and found the leaping Clark in a play that was destined to be known as "The Catch." When Ray Wersching connected on the point-after, the Niners had finally conquered their rivals.

"It looked desperate, but I could see that ball very well," Clark explained. "I just ran through it and leaped, and the ball was there just like Bill said it would be. It was an awesome feeling."

6 Super Bowl III (1969): N.Y. Jets 16, Baltimore 7

What made this game one of the all-time greats was not the scintillating play on the field. The drama of this contest was the victory by the humble AFL over the imperial NFL.

After consecutive one-sided victories by the Packers in the first two Super Bowls over the Chiefs and the Raiders, this game appeared to be an even greater mismatch. The Colts, 13-1 during the regular season, had an earth-shattering defense led by



Joe Namath guaranteed victory for the AFL in Super Bowl III, and he delivered.

end Bubba Smith and a devastating offense that had put up 402 points. The Jets had quarterback Joe Namath, head coach Weeb Ewbank—who had been fired by the Colts—and an undersized defense.

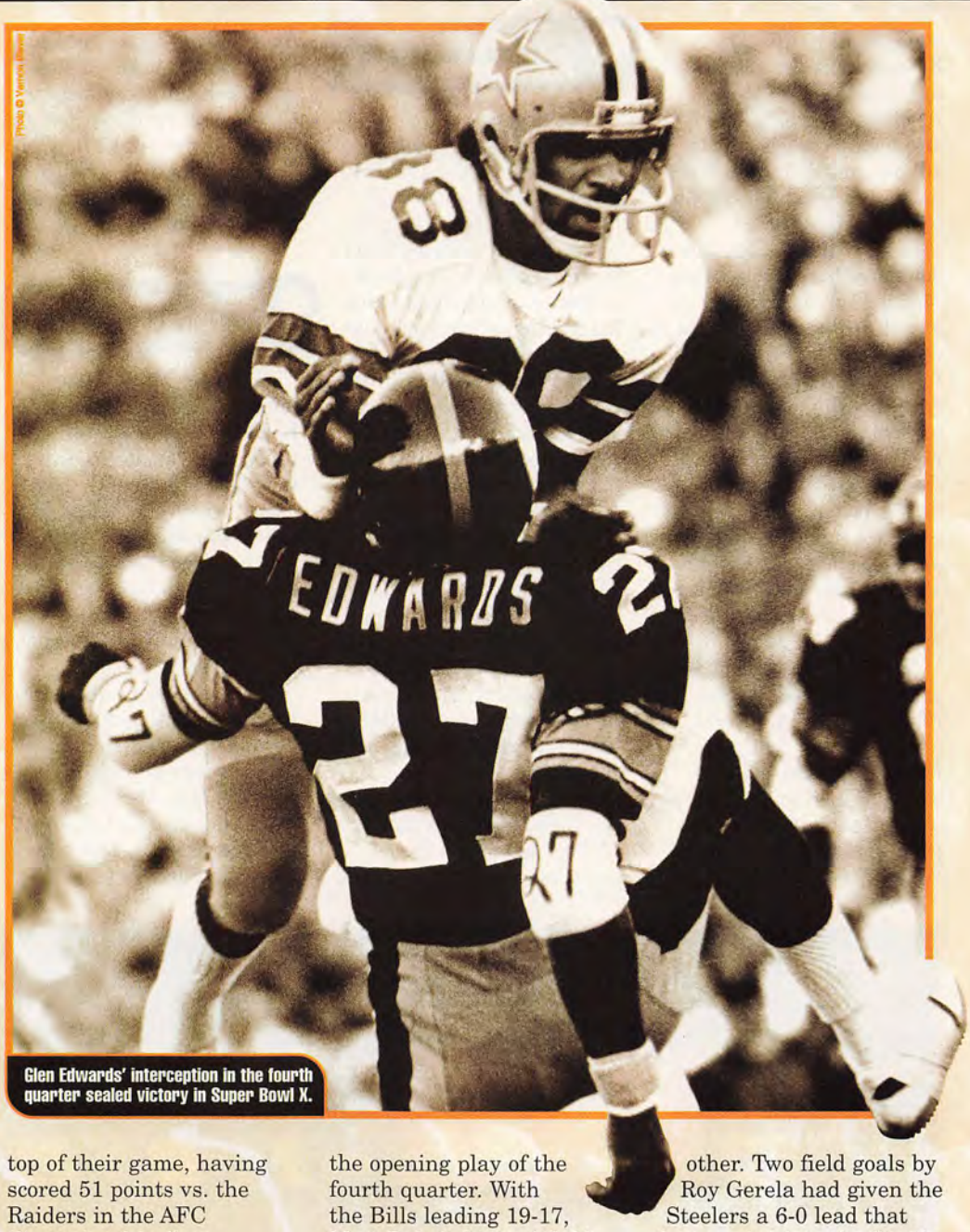
Nevertheless, the Jets were not intimidated. Namath, goaded by taunting Colts fans, guaranteed a Jets victory three days before the Super Bowl.

He delivered.

The Jets' defense systematically frustrated the powerful Colts' offense, and when fullback Matt Snell scored on a 4-yard run in the second quarter, the Jets had a lead they would never relinquish. Jim Turner booted three field goals in the second half, and the Colts only managed one TD during that half. The Jets' defense consistently shut down Baltimore quarterback Earl Morrall, holding him to 6-of-17 passing with three interceptions.

The AFL, constantly ridiculed by the haughty NFL, had the last laugh. The older league had gotten its nose bloodied, and then had both its eyes blackened the following year when the Chiefs whipped the Vikings in Super Bowl IV.

"I was as happy for the Chiefs, Raiders and Patriots as I was for myself," said Namath. "This was truly a league victory. We not only were as good as the NFL, we were better."



Glen Edwards' interception in the fourth quarter sealed victory in Super Bowl X.

7 Super Bowl XXV (1991): • N.Y. Giants 20, Buffalo 19 •

The Super Bowl had annually turned into one of the most boring, one-sided games of the year. Despite all the network hype, the Super Bowl had become recess for the NFC representative, which recorded easy victories in five of the preceding six games.

In this contest, Bill Parcells led his Giants against a juggernaut of an offensive team from Buffalo. The no-huddle Bills were on top of their game, having scored 51 points vs. the Raiders in the AFC Championship Game.

Parcells knew his team could not trade points with the Bills and wanted to control the ball. The bottom line—the Giants kept the ball out of the Bills' hands for a Super Bowl record 40:33. The first drive of the second half was the Giants' defining moment. Trailing 12-10, the Giants went on a 14-play, 75-yard drive that culminated when running back Ottis Anderson rumbled into the end zone from a yard out. The Bills, frustrated by the Giants' ability to hold on to the football, regained the lead when running back Thurman Thomas scored on a 31-yard run on the opening play of the fourth quarter. With the Bills leading 19-17, Matt Bahr's 21-yard field goal gave the Giants a one-point lead. The Bills had a late opportunity, but Scott Norwood's 47-yard field goal attempt sailed wide to the right with just seconds remaining. The Bills would make it to the Super Bowl the next three seasons, but this was the closest they would come to victory.

8 1972 AFC divisional playoffs: • Pittsburgh 13, Oakland 7 •

This was the first in a series of great playoff contests between two AFC rivals who developed an intense dislike for each other. Two field goals by Roy Gerela had given the Steelers a 6-0 lead that they carried into the fourth quarter. The brilliant Steel Curtain defense had constantly thwarted Raider quarterback Daryle Lamonica and running back Marv Hubbard. But with the game's minutes dwindling down to a precious few, Raiders quarterback Ken Stabler scrambled to his left and away from Steelers defensive tackle Mean Joe Greene.

As he looked to fire the ball downfield, Stabler found a strip of freedom at Three Rivers Stadium and scampered 30 yards into the end zone. The Raiders had a 7-6 lead with just 1:13 remaining, and the Steelers

were about to die. The Raiders' defense was battering quarterback Terry Bradshaw, and on fourth-and-long from the Steeler 40, he eluded the Raiders' pass rush and hurled a pass to a streaking John "Frenchy" Fuqua. Raiders defensive back Jack Tatum reached the ball before Fuqua and punched it out of danger…or so he thought. Instead of falling harmlessly to the ground, it careened toward rookie running back Franco Harris, who was trailing the play. Harris saw the ball coming toward him, picked it up off his shoe tops (or did he?) at the Raider 42-yard line and raced into the end zone to give the Steelers a 13-7 win.

"I wasn't thinking about catching the ball on the rebound, but I did see it coming at me," Harris recalls. "At that point, it was just instincts. I caught it, continued to run and then I'm in the end zone. We win."

9 Super Bowl X (1976): Pittsburgh 21, Dallas 17

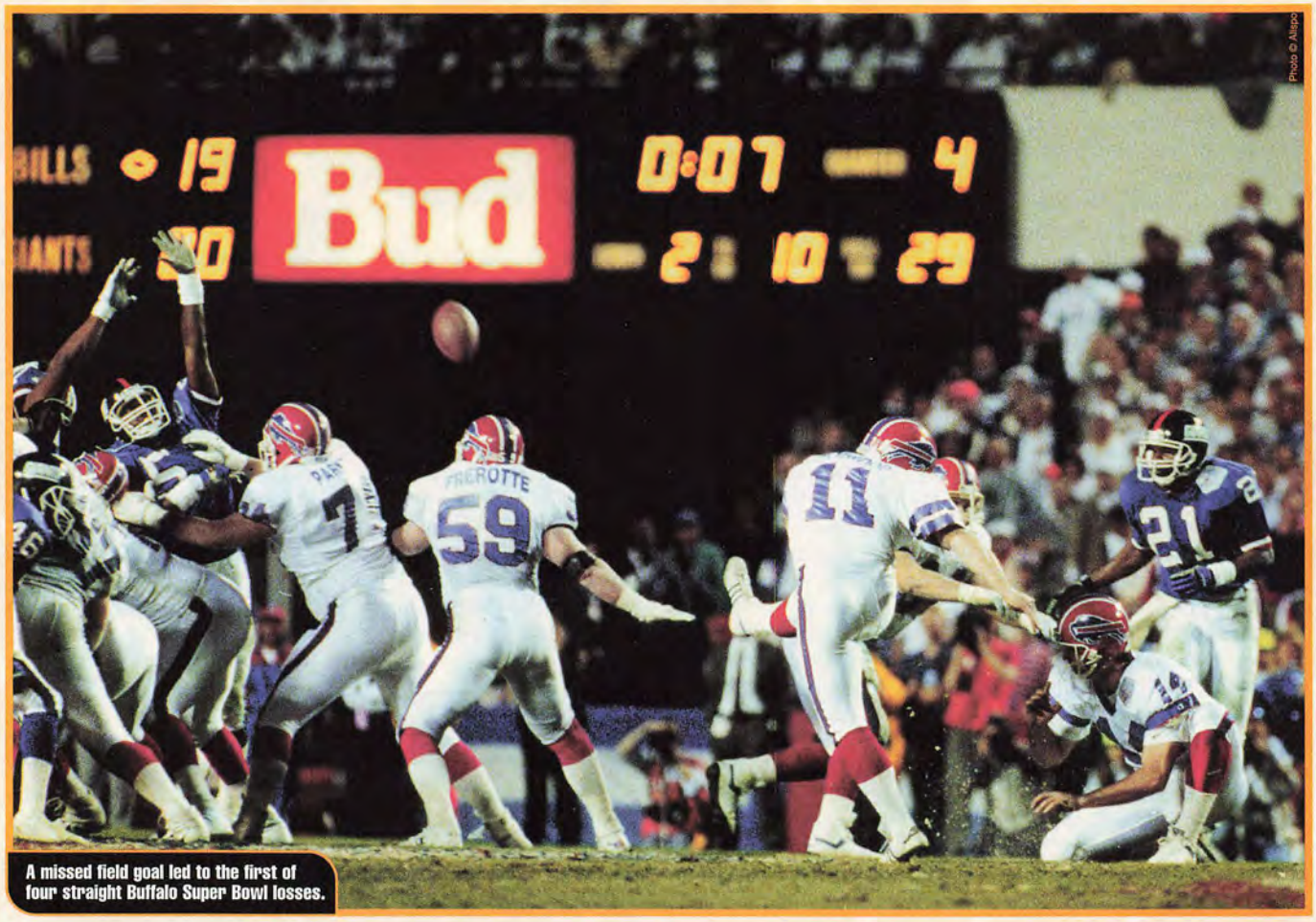
The Steelers were favored to win the Super Bowl for the second year in a row, while the Cowboys became the first wild-card team to earn a Super Bowl berth. While the Cowboys had an opportunistic team led by Roger Staubach and wideout Drew Pearson, the Steelers had a brilliant cast that included quarterback Terry Bradshaw, defensive tackle Joe Greene and wideout Lynn Swann. On this day, Swann was in flight. He made several brilliant catches, including a 64-yard TD grab late in the fourth quarter that appeared to give the Steelers a seemingly insurmountable 21-10 lead. However, Staubach hit Percy Howard with a 34-yard TD pass with just 1:48 remaining to pull the Cowboys within four points. An onside kick attempt failed, but the Steelers could not move the ball and the Cowboys took over on their own 39 with 1:22 to go. Staubach passed the Cowboys to two first downs, but defensive back Glen Edwards snuffed out the rally with an interception of a last-second pass.

10 1966 NFL Championship Game: Green Bay 34, Dallas 27

One year later, these teams would meet in the Ice Bowl in Green Bay, but the precursor was also a brilliant football display. This game, which took place in the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, was another Packers victory. This time, however, the decisive play was made by the Green Bay defense, not the offense.

But Bart Starr made his presence known, throwing four TD passes—the last a 28-yard toss to backup wideout Max McGee, who would later go on to heroics in Super Bowl I. That play gave the Packers a 34-20 lead, but Dallas quarterback Don Meredith brought the Cowboys to within striking distance when he connected with wideout Frank Clarke on a 68-yard pass play. After a defensive stand by the Cowboys, Meredith led them in for a tying score in the final minute. However, as Meredith was looking for speedy wideout Bob Hayes in the end zone, he was forced out of the pocket and desperately threw the ball into the end zone. It floated into the hands of Packers' defensive back Tom Brown, and secured Green Bay's second consecutive title.

"We might have underestimated them a bit," said Packers defensive end Willie Davis. "But the Cowboys put us to the test and this game could have gone the other way. But when it came down to it, we were not about to face [Vince] Lombardi in the locker room having blown this opportunity." ✖



A missed field goal led to the first of four straight Buffalo Super Bowl losses.

Blunder Bowls

Sometimes the best vs. the best equals the worst.

by Steve Silverman

Not every championship game has the drama of Green Bay vs. Dallas. Some won't even approach it. Maybe the players were nervous. Maybe they choked. Sometimes, scouts and coaches do a poor job of preparing their teams, and the results are one-sided, error-prone matchups between good clubs that are not at their best. Then again, some games just stink. With that in mind, here's a look at five postseason debacles that made fans who witnessed them hold their collective noses:

1 Super Bowl V (1971): Baltimore 16, Dallas 13

This game is forever known as the Blunder Bowl due to all the mistakes made by both teams. Not only did the teams combine for seven turnovers, it was also the first Super Bowl ever played on artificial turf—the phony grass underlined the phony game. The most memorable play of this debacle—other than Jim O'Brien's game-winning 32-yard field goal—was a 75-yard touchdown pass from Johnny Unitas to tight end John Mackey. Unitas' intended receiver on the play was Eddie Hinton, but the ball skidded off his finger tips, then off of defensive back Mel Renfro's hands and finally fell into the hands of the surprised Mackey. "The pass wasn't to me, but I knew what to do when I got it," he recalls. "It was about the only play that worked all day."

2 1979 NFC Championship Game: L.A. Rams 9, Tampa Bay 0

Through their first three NFL seasons, the expansion Bucs had rivaled baseball's New York Mets for futility. The orange-clad Bucs were seeing red during that span, suffering 26 straight losses before finally winning a game. Even coach John McKay knew his team was awful. But in their fourth year, the Bucs won the NFC Central and defeated Philadelphia to gain a berth in the NFC title game. Yet their offense was absolutely invisible. Neither Doug Williams nor backup Mike Rae could dent the Rams' defense. Both quarterbacks were 2-of-13 and the Bucs didn't mount a scoring threat the entire game.

3 1969 AFL playoffs: Oakland 56, Houston 7

During the AFL's final season, the Raiders had a great team, finishing first in the West with a 12-1-1 record. The Oilers were a modest 6-6-2, a sad mark, but good enough for second place in the East. In the AFL's playoff scheme, the winner of the West met the runner-up in the East, hence this matchup. The Raiders featured studs like QB Daryle Lamonica, running back Hewritt Dixon, receiver Fred Biletnikoff and safety Willie Brown. They swaggered all over the field, but had to be biting their lips when they saw the mundane Oilers facing them at the Oakland Coliseum. The Raiders dominated, chasing Oilers' quarterback Pete Beathard all over the field while scoring 28 points in the first quarter—they could have scored 80.

4 Super Bowl VII (1973): Miami 14, Washington 7

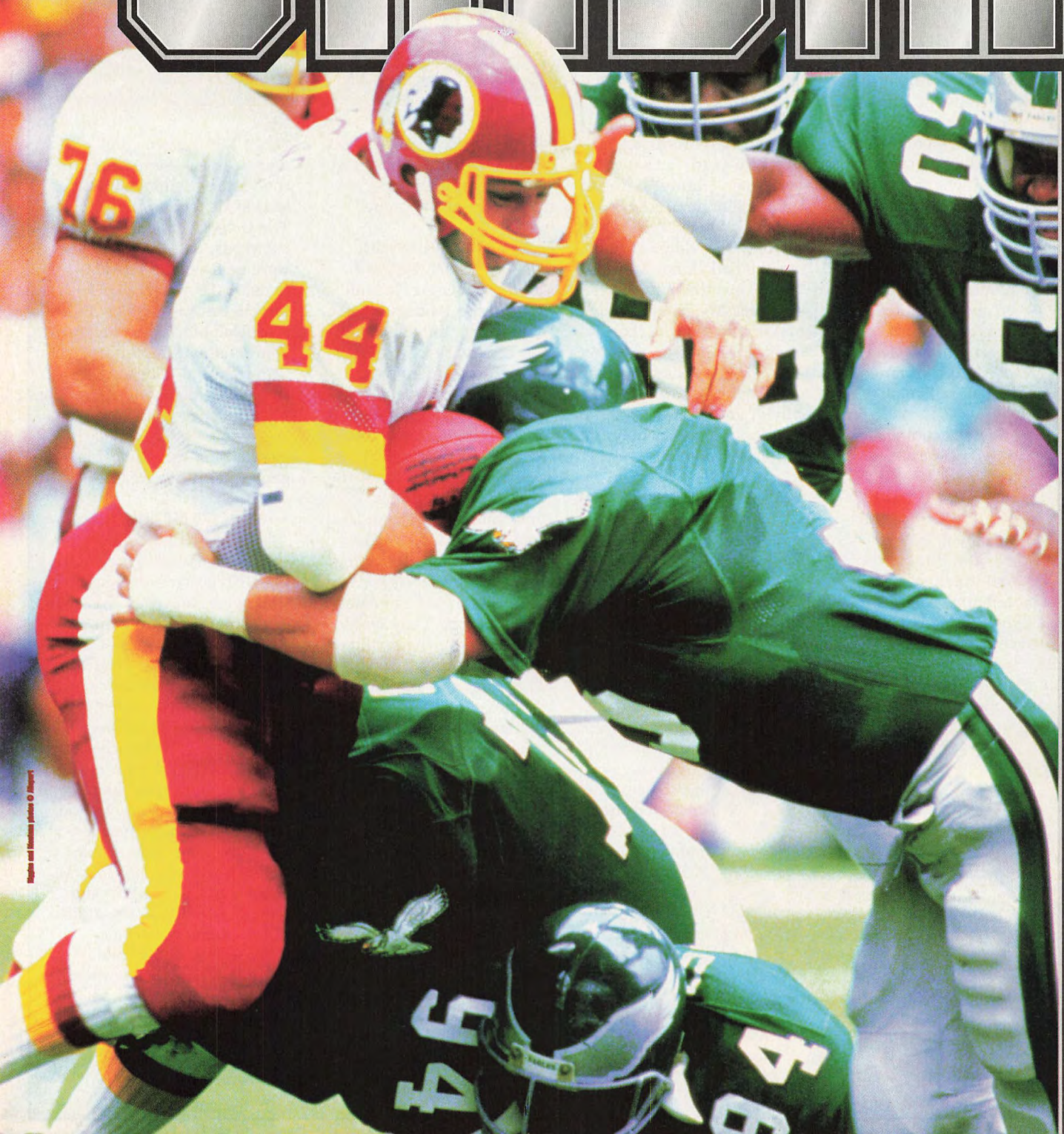
This was the game that capped the Dolphins' undefeated 1972 season, so it wasn't a contest without drama, but the Dolphins' offense did nothing to impress. Led by quarterback Bob Griese, Miami recorded only 12 first downs and never came close to the end zone after gaining a 14-0 lead at the end of the half. The Dolphins had only 253 net yards, and the Redskins were held to 228. The only Redskin TD was a 49-yard fumble return by Mike Bass after Dolphin kicker Garo Yepremian attempted to throw the ball following a botched field goal attempt. Miami achieved its perfect season by playing one of the most boring championship games in NFL history.

5 1970 NFC playoffs: Dallas 5, Detroit 0

The Lions had not been in the NFL postseason since 1957 when they won the NFL championship with a 59-14 victory over the Cleveland Browns. So after a 13-year absence, they would be primed for a big effort against the Cowboys, right? Wrong. Quarterback Bill Munson and running back Mel Farr came unglued in Dallas—they simply could not move the ball. A lot of their problems were due to freakish winter conditions in Texas, but the Cowboys did register a safety and a Mike Clark field goal to come away with a victory and advance to the second round. "We did not play football on that day," said Lions coach Joe Schmidt. "We literally could not bend over and tie our own shoes." ✖

MVP'S ALL-

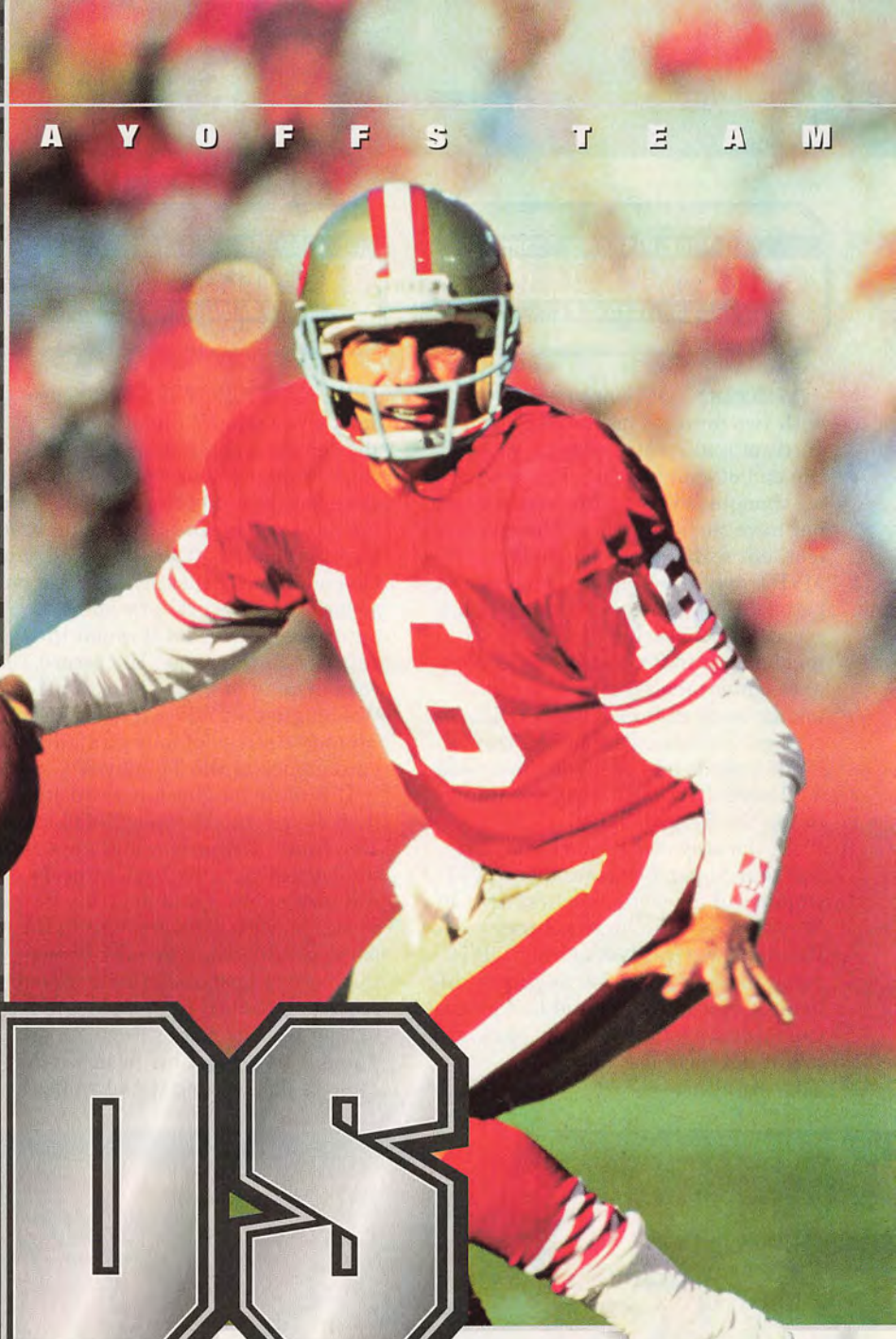
GRIDIRON



TIME PLAYOFFS TEAM

ON GODS

players make the postseason... the postseason makes legends



BY THE EDITORS OF MVP

The playoffs are a time of celebration for teams that have fought through the regular season and earned the right to fight another day. And for teams that didn't make the cut, it is a time of grieving, a time to lick wounds, bury the dead and prepare for next season.

But the playoffs aren't only for the fans of the victors. The postseason gives arm-chair quarterbacks a chance to see many of the great players from other teams, players they've only been able to read about or catch glimpses of here and there on cable. There is no better opportunity for a player to establish a national following.

Every year, new legends are born as quarterbacks vie for keys to Canton, defensive players load up for the one hit that will be replayed over and over again, and unlikely heroes emerge from the back of the bench.

So who are the greatest all-time postseason performers? After weeks of shouting matches, thinly veiled threats and acts of office vandalism, the editors at MVP have come up with their first-ever All-Time Playoffs team. Based on number and quality of appearances, as well as all-around tough guy acts in the postseason, the foremost prime-time players have been plucked from the NFL history books and brought here for one last tour of the spotlight.

All-Time Playoffs Team

FIELD GENERALS

Quarterbacks

WHO DO YOU want behind center with two minutes on the clock and 80 yards of real estate between you and the end of your season? That's what we thought, too. **Joe Montana** might not have the best arm or the quickest feet, but as his three Super Bowl MVP trophies will attest, no one was better in big game situations. With a record 5,772 passing yards and 45 touchdowns in 23 postseason appearances, Montana's grittiest performance came in Super Bowl XXIII against Cincinnati, where he threw for 357 yards and coolly orchestrated a 92-yard drive with 3:20 remaining to top the Bengals 20-16.

As the only other quarterback to win four Super Bowls (and two MVP trophies of his own), our first arm off the bench is Pittsburgh's **Terry Bradshaw**. Granted, neither QB is going to make coaching any more difficult, but if Montana had had a Steel Curtain as a safety net, the Niners might not have lost in the '80s—at all.

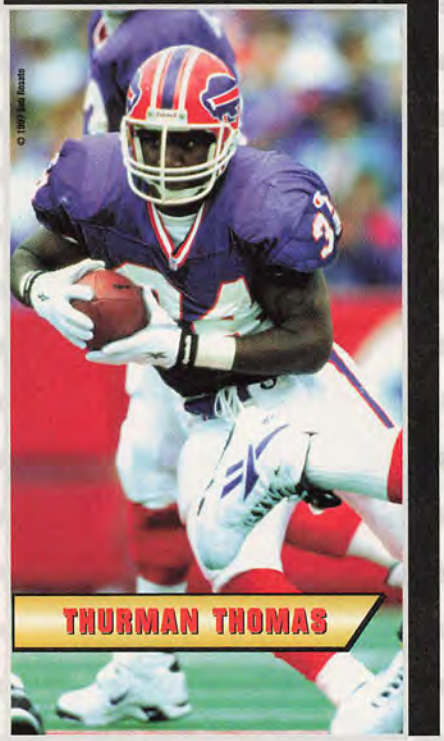
All-Time Playoffs Team

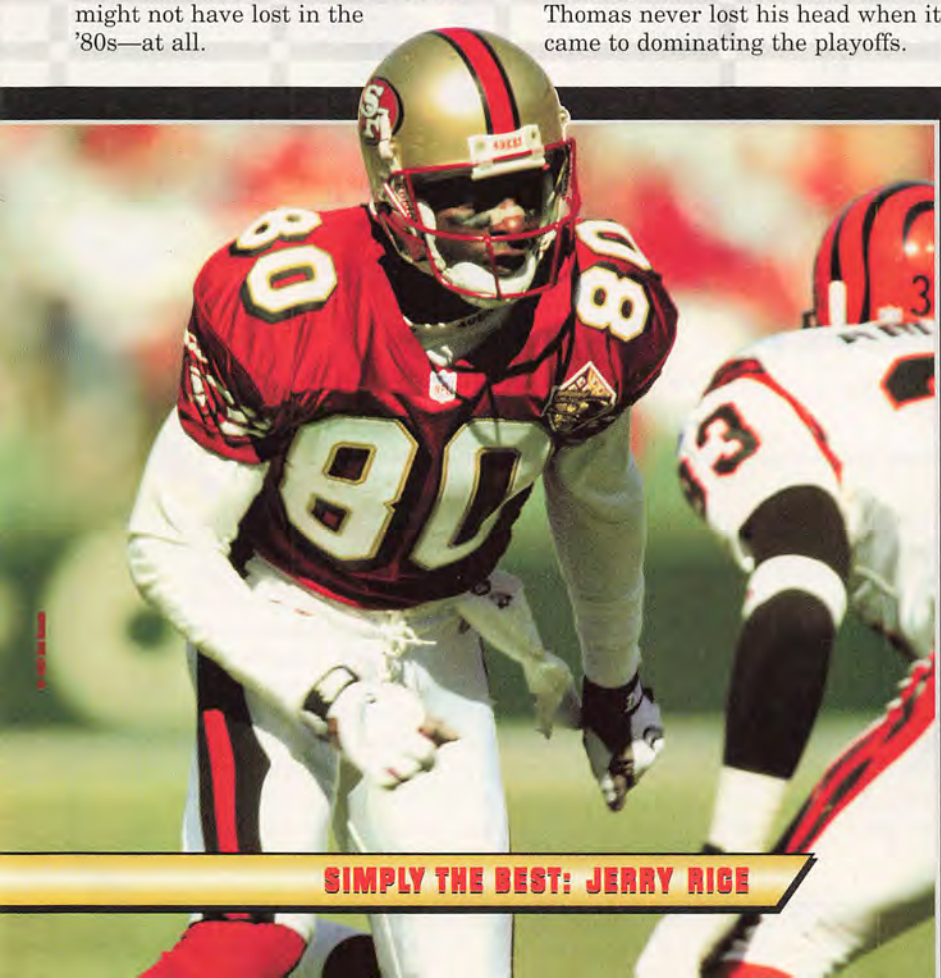
BACKFIELD OF DREAMS

Running Backs

IN SUPER BOWL XX, Chicago defensive tackle William Perry showed the possibilities of a 300-pound fullback, but when it comes to sheer power out of the backfield, we'll take **John Riggins**. A bruising rusher who rebelled off the field and rumbled on it, the Redskins fullback was a combination workhorse/force of nature as he blasted through the best defenses in the game. His record 166-yard display in Super Bowl XVII gave Washington a 27-17 win over Miami, capping a string of four straight 100-yard games in the '83 playoffs.

If Buffalo had been a bit luckier in their four straight Super Bowl losses, **Thurman Thomas** would have been the hottest running back in postseason history. As it stands, with 19 career playoffs games to the halfback's credit, Thomas ranks among the top five postseason rushers *and* receivers. Ribbed for misplacing his helmet prior to Super Bowl XXVIII, Thomas never lost his head when it came to dominating the playoffs.





All-Time Playoffs Team

GOOD HANDS PEOPLE

Wide Receivers

THE GREATEST PASS-CATCHER in the history of the game, San Francisco's **Jerry Rice**, is even greater come crunch time. The crown jewel in the career of the postseason's leading receiver came in Super Bowl XXIII, when he was named MVP after squeezing 11 passes for a record 215 yards. Would you like fries with that cornerback, Mr. Rice?

In the '90s, it seems that if Rice isn't playing in January, the Cowboys' **Michael Irvin** is. It should come as no surprise that one of Rice's greatest rivals in the regular season is also one of the most prolific playoff performers in NFL history. Irvin has tallied 83 receptions for 1,283 yards, ranking second and third, respectively, on the postseason receiving list.

Rice and Irvin may dominate the '80s and '90s, but the '70s belonged to **Lynn Swann**. In a game defined by violence, Swann was poetry in motion—the epitome of grace under pressure. He always found an opening when the Steelers needed a clutch catch in the playoffs; Swann had four big receptions for 161 yards in Super Bowl X, snaring MVP honors.

All-Time Playoffs Team

IN THE TRENCHES

Tight End & Offensive Line

TOUGHER THAN A two-dollar steak and underrated as a receiver, New York's **Mark Bavaro** embodied the grit and blue-collar approach of the Giants' Super Bowl teams in '87 and '91. Notoriously close-mouthed, Bavaro makes our team for the way he spoke volumes on the field.

Further upstate in Buffalo, center **Kent Hull** may be one of the most unheralded members of the Bills' Super Bowl teams, but he was the cornerstone of the line for one of the top offenses the NFL has ever seen. Only now is Hull receiving the credit he deserves as Buffalo's running game tapers a year after his retirement.

As a guard with the Oakland Raiders, **Gene Upshaw** bowled over linebackers with as much conviction as he takes on administrative-types as the current executive director of the NFL Players Association. By keeping quarterbacks like Ken Stabler and Jim Plunkett safer on the field than off, it's no coincidence Upshaw played in 10 AFL/AFC championship games and three Super Bowls.

Crouching alongside Upshaw on the Raiders Super Bowl lines was the human wrecking ball, **Art Shell**. When opponents were brave enough to step in the tackle's path, they usually didn't stay there long. Playing in 24 postseason games over his 14-year career, Shell retired a winner when Oakland beat the Eagles 27-10 in Super Bowl XV.

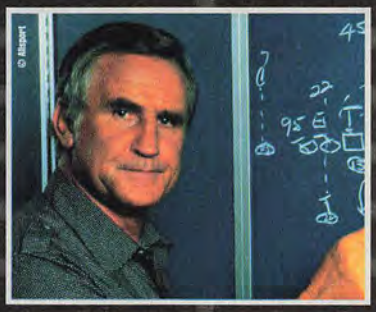
In the trenches across the bay, **Randy Cross** also knew a thing or two about protecting his teammates and clearing out would-be defenders. Cross helped provide Montana with enough time and running back Roger Craig with enough daylight for the 49ers to win three Super Bowls during his stay on the San Francisco line.

No lineman came any tougher than **Forrest Gregg**. Jim Taylor and Paul Hornung made careers out of running behind Gregg, who won seven NFL titles and two Super Bowls with the Packers and another with the Cowboys. "The finest player I've ever coached" is how Vince Lombardi described the Hall of Fame tackle, and that's good enough for us.

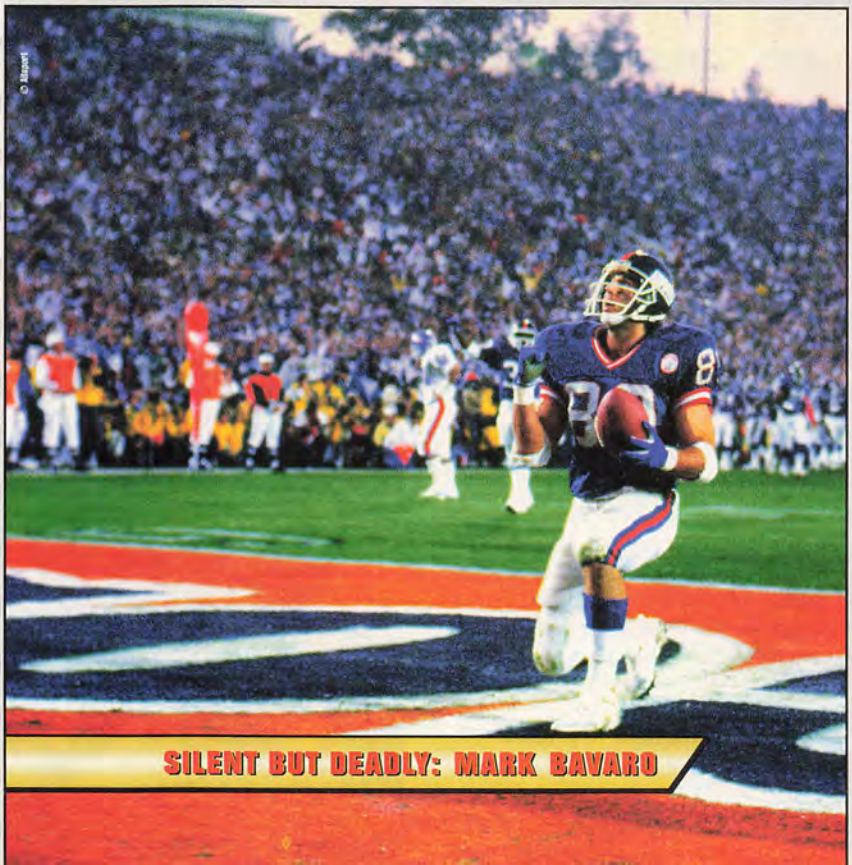
BIG BOSS MEN

THE GUYS WHO CALL THE SHOTS BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE

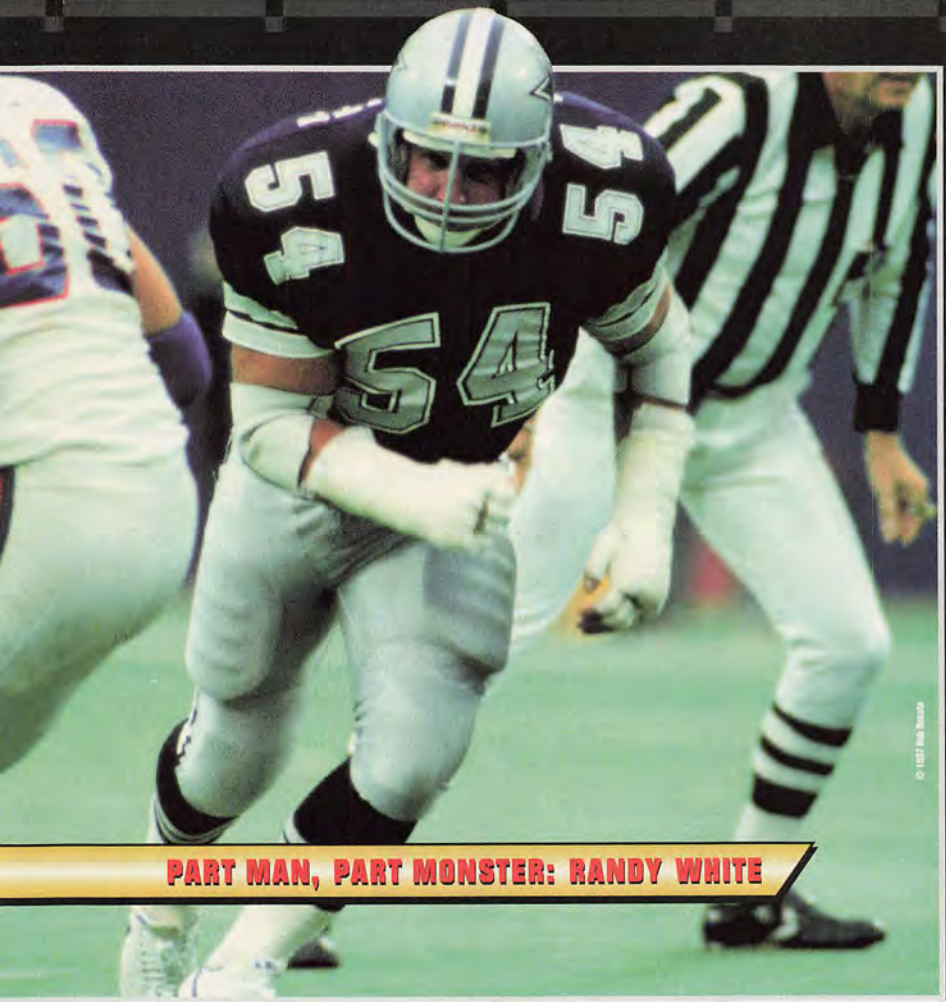
Owner, George Halas
The original two-sport athlete (he was replaced in the New York outfield by Babe Ruth), Halas was a throwback before there was such a thing. A professional football pioneer and all-around tough guy, Halas was a player/coach/owner who saw the Chicago Bears to eight NFL titles in his 63 years with the league. A hardliner with a sense of humor, Halas once sold tickets to a playoff game on the opponent's bench...to Bears fans.



Coach, Don Shula
The legendary Hall of Fame leader of the Dolphins and Colts passed Halas to become the NFL's all-time winningest coach. With 347 regular-season wins in 33 years as a head coach, Shula thrived in the postseason, too. He has coached his teams to a record six Super Bowls and 19 playoff victories, but his finest moment came during the undefeated 1972 season which was capped with a 14-7 Super Bowl VII victory over Washington. ✖



SILENT BUT DEADLY: MARK BAVARO



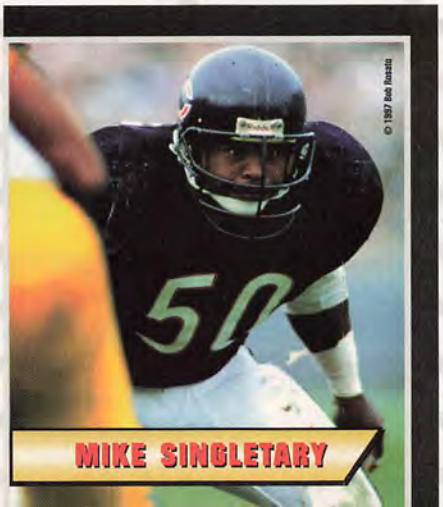
All-Time Playoffs Team
THE GREAT WALL
Defensive Backs

THE "MEANEST" MEMBER of the Steel Curtain's disgruntled defense of the '70s, **Joe Greene** was twice named the NFL's Defensive Player of the Year, earned 10 Pro Bowl appearances, played on four Super Bowl teams—and still found time to trade his jersey for a bottle of Coke.

Longtime NFC counterpart to Mean Joe, the Doomsday Defense's **Randy White** was a nine-time Pro Bowl selection and co-MVP of the Cowboys' 27-10 Super Bowl XII win over Denver. Also known as "Manster," White may actually have been meaner than Green. In a preseason game, White, a linebacker-turned-defensive tackle, was once worked into such a lather that he took off his helmet in a fight—apparently to bludgeon his opponent with it.

Speaking of Manster, the most malicious Monster of the Midway was the resident mauler on a 1985 Bears defense that regularly pulverized the opposition. Defensive end **Richard Dent**'s dazzling MVP performance (the fourth defensive player to receive that honor) in Super Bowl XX was overshadowed in NFL history by a Refrigerator in the Chicago backfield.

Impossible to overshadow, yet seldom given the credit he deserves for his team's five Super Bowl victories—the most for any individual player—**Charles Haley**'s speed rush and leadership made him an invaluable member of two championship clubs in San Francisco and three more with the Dallas Cowboys before a bad back forced him into retirement.



All-Time Playoffs Team
THE HIT SQUAD
Linebackers

THE FIRST THING you saw was his semi-toothed scowl—usually just before you were seeing stars. **Jack Lambert** spearheaded Pittsburgh's Steel Curtain defense and served as the middle-man between **Jack Ham** and **Andy Russell** in the most fearsome linebacking corps the league has ever seen.

Though it's nearly impossible to break up that trio, no all-time playoffs defense would be complete without the man called "Contact." When **Willie Lanier** wasn't knocking the tar out of somebody, he was picking off passes. He finished his career with 27 interceptions, including one in Super Bowl IV which killed a Vikings rally and put Kansas City on track for a 23-7 victory and its only NFL title.

A gentleman off the field, **Mike Singletary** was nothing short of a hard-hitting maniac on it. Samurai Mike's insane wide-eyed stare said it all. He had the focus of a laser and was the glue that bound the Bears' Super Bowl XX defense. He also holds the unofficial record for breaking helmets—his opponent's and his own.

All-Time Playoffs Team
SECONDARY CITIZENS
Safeties & Corners

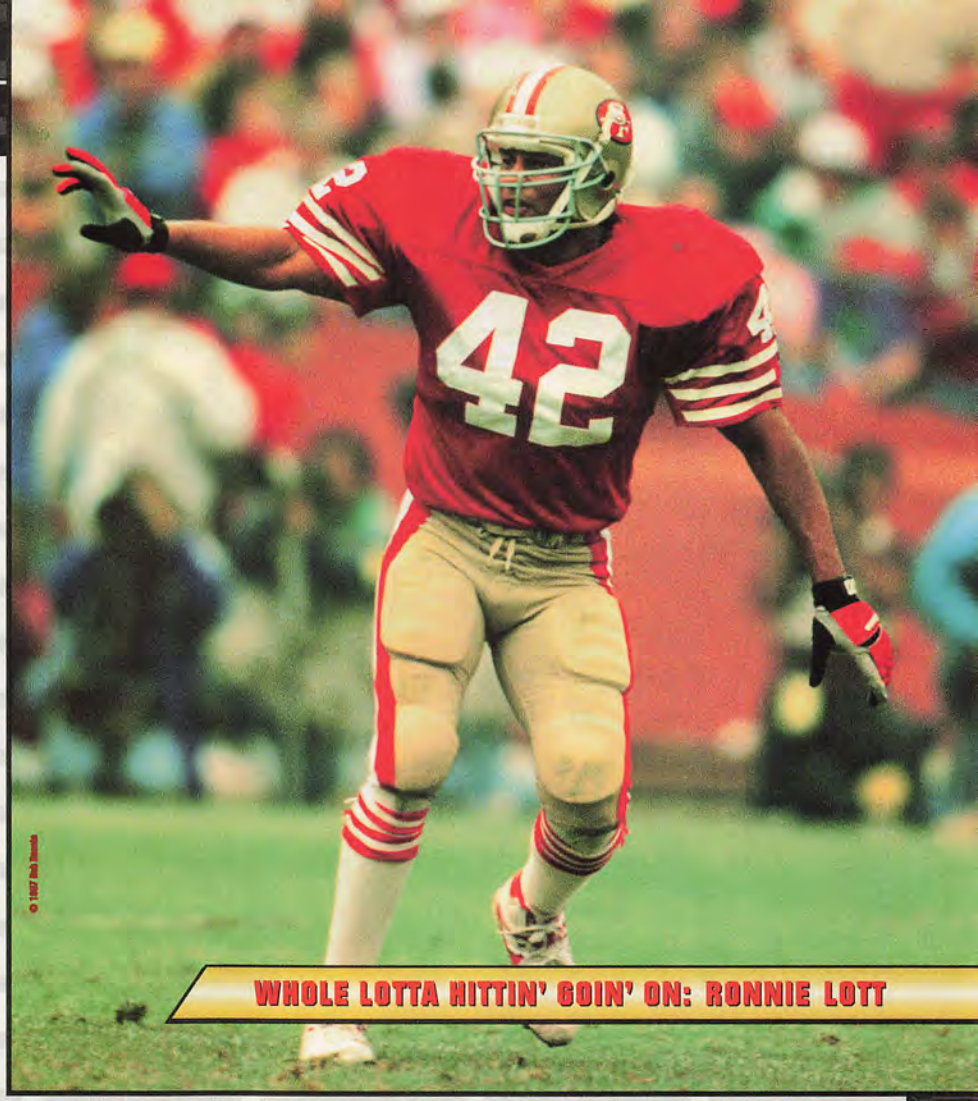
FORGET PETE ROSE. The real all-time hits leader in professional sports is safety **Ronnie Lott**. Just ask any receiver who dared to cut across the middle against the 49ers in Lott's heyday—when he won four Super Bowl rings. Then again, most of those pass catchers can still only talk about it with their therapists.

With an NFL record nine career postseason interceptions, Cowboys' free safety **Charlie Waters** snagged three of them in one game, a 37-7 rout of the Bears to open the 1977 playoffs. The performance helped set the tone

for Dallas as it closed its romp through the playoffs with a Super Bowl XII victory over Denver.

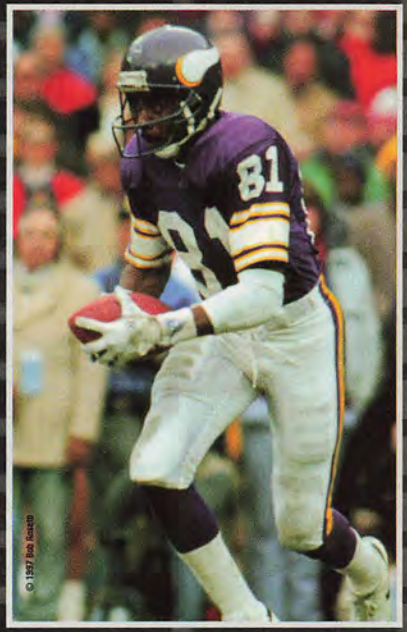
Possibly the exact opposite of both Lott and Watters in terms of making contact—yet perhaps even more effective at narrowing the playing field—is **Deion Sanders**. For your viewing pleasure, Prime Time is at his best when the spotlight shines at its brightest—in the postseason. Not only did he earn personal back-to-back Super Bowl championships with the 49ers and Cowboys, Neon Deion also batted .533 in the 1992 World Series with Atlanta.

In a secondary populated almost exclusively by 49ers and Cowboys stands a lone Green Bay Packer. **Willie Wood** may have been one of football's best kept secrets coming out of USC in 1960. He had to write several teams for tryouts before eventually signing with the Packers as a free agent, but by the time he retired, everyone knew his name. Due to outstanding penmanship and a penchant for picking off passes, Wood went on to play in six NFL title games, including Super Bowl I, in which his 50-yard interception return set up the first of three second-half touchdowns leading to a 35-10 victory. ✖



WHOLE LOTTA HITTIN' GOIN' ON: RONNIE LOTT

SOMETHING SPECIAL



DEFENSE WINS GAMES. SPECIAL TEAMS WIN CHAMPIONSHIPS

Kicker, George Blanda
The NFL's ultimate elder statesman, Blanda's 22 career postseason field goals are the most by any player. A double threat, Blanda could also fill in at quarterback in a pinch—he passed for 26,920 yards over his unparalleled 26-year career.

Punter, Ray Guy
Guy has more experience punting in the playoffs than anyone else, and he still owns the best game by a punter to date—he averaged 56 yards on four punts in Oakland's 34-27 win over San Diego in the 1981 AFC Championship Game to help the Raiders become the only Wild Card team to win a title. Give this Guy a hand, er, foot.

Kick returner, Desmond Howard
The first special teams player to be named Super Bowl MVP, Howard ran roughshod over the Patriots for 244 return yards including a 99-yard TD kickoff return to push the Pack to a 35-21 win. He didn't stop running until he hit Disneyland.

Punt returner, Anthony Carter
A.C. became the NFL's all-time punt return yardage leader in the playoffs in only eight games. Carter piled up most of his 259 postseason return yards on one January afternoon in 1988 when he ran back 143 yards worth of kicks, including an 84-yarder for a touchdown. His 15.2 average per return is also the best in NFL annals. ✖

Vince Lombardi's Packers Win Super Bowl II

Before an Orange Bowl crowd of 75,546, Don Chandler kicked four field goals, cornerback Herb Adderley returned an interception 60 yards for a touchdown and Bart Starr completed 13 of 24 passes for 202 yards as the Green Bay Packers topped the Oakland Raiders 33-14 in Super Bowl II. The game also marked the end of the great Vince Lombardi's nine-year career as Packers head coach, capping a legacy which included five world championships and two Super Bowl titles. ✖

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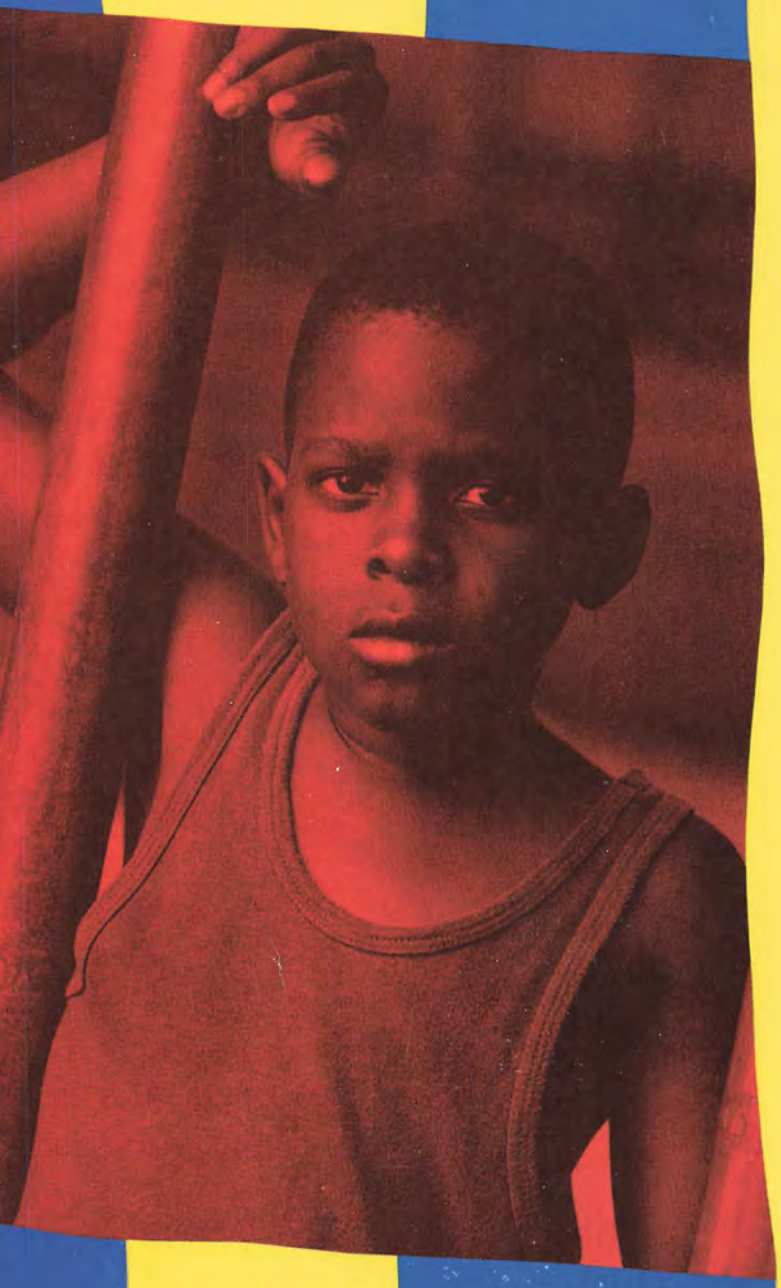

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His mother works two jobs.

His brother's going to prison.

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